



MAKERERE

UNIVERSITY

**REPRESENTATION OF SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE
POETRY OF KAGAYI NGOBI**

BY

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, Professor Godfrey B. Asimwe and Professor Joyce A. Asimwe, to my beloved Yvette Martha Nankunda, and to the memory of all the African poetic legends whose memories and genius in literary creativity live on among these, and the generations of African poets to come.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how poetry serves as a means of engaging with socio-cultural and political realities in post-independence Uganda, with a specific focus on the works of Kagayi Ngobi, a notable Ugandan poet and performer. Through a critical analysis of his written and performed poetry, the research investigates how Kagayi navigates and critiques Uganda's complex postcolonial landscape. The study is rooted in two theories: performance theory, drawing on scholars such as Richard Schechner, Richard Bauman, and Victor Turner, and their ideas on embodiment and restored behavior, and decolonial thought. It specifically incorporates Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's concepts of epistemic disobedience and the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being. These frameworks provide perspectives through which Kagayi's poetic voice is understood not only as a performative act but also as a decolonial gesture that challenges the dominant narratives inherited from colonial structures. The research examines how his diction, themes, and oral aesthetics confront issues such as inequality, cultural alienation, failed leadership, and social stratification. By exploring how Kagayi uses poetry to reflect and respond to lived experiences in Uganda, the study highlights poetry's ability to reclaim indigenous knowledge systems and to revive public consciousness. In this way, the research not only analyzes the artistic and thematic elements of Kagayi's work but also situates his poetry within the larger struggle for cultural identity, civic awareness, and historical justice. Through the interaction of performance and text, Kagayi's work becomes a space for resistance, memory, and hope. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that contemporary Ugandan poetry, as exemplified by Kagayi's work, is a vital form of social commentary and a dynamic medium for envisioning alternative futures based on justice, dignity, and self-determination.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.0. Introduction

This research investigates the elaborate ways in which poetry functions as a reflection of socio-cultural and political transformations within Uganda. The study focuses on the works of prominent Ugandan poet Kagayi Ngobi (formerly Peter Kagayi). It interrogates the various ways in which his poetic expression engages with the country's social and political landscape.

As Israel Muvindi observes, African poetry places its focus on “protest and struggle” against injustice, a tradition rooted in the colonial experience where Africans were grossly humiliated on their own continent (Muvindi 508). Consequently, poetry became, and continues to be, a medium for challenging injustice in all its forms.

In the context of this study, socio-cultural factors refer to aspects such as social development, economic growth, and cultural change, including elements like social classes, religious beliefs, and communal values. Political factors, on the other hand, involve leadership, governance, public policy, and systemic inequalities. In their efforts to expose these inequalities, writers often find themselves advocating for socio-cultural and political transformation. Kagayi exemplifies this tradition.

The study, therefore, examines Kagayi Ngobi’s poetic expression as a means of articulating change within Uganda’s socio-cultural and political spheres, with a specific focus on the post-independence era. By analyzing his work, the research explores how he engages with these social and political spaces through performance, thematic concerns, and poetic style, thereby reflecting the complexities of Uganda’s post-independence struggles and aspirations.

1.1. Background to the Study

1.1.1. The Development of African Poetry

The study of Kagayi Ngobi's poetry greatly benefits from understanding the development of poetry in Africa. This section briefly outlines the evolution of African poetry that helps position Kagayi among the generation of spoken word poets in Uganda and across Africa as a whole. Scholars of African literature like Finnegan, Barber, and Bauman trace African poetry back to the pre-colonial period, citing praise poems and songs as examples that indicate the existence of African poetry before colonialism, for instance, Agawu, Agovi, and Morris, among others. This poetry was not written down but passed down through various African societies by ancestors as a means to preserve their culture. Susan Kiguli, examining oral poetry and popular song in South Africa and Uganda post-apartheid and post-civil war, respectively, observed that Africans were drawn more to the oral aspects of poetry, song, and drama since they were primarily for performance and easily accessible to their communities (Kiguli 17). During this period, poets mainly served in the courts of kings, while others occasionally had opportunities to showcase their talents through poetic performances during community celebrations. The assertion that African poetry existed for years before colonialism is indisputable. The arrival of European colonizers in Africa, particularly during and after the scramble for and partition of Africa, led to a transformation in the realm of African poetry, giving rise to modern African poetry and marking the beginning of its development.

African poetry was originally performed orally across different societies and in various African languages. However, this changed with the introduction of modern African poetry, which, while still poetry from Africa, was significantly influenced by the cultures of the colonialists, especially

through language. African poetry began transitioning from oral to written forms, with much of this poetry now being composed in European languages such as French, English, and Portuguese. African poets encountered poetry in English, which altered their approach to presenting poetry. John Pepper Clark is one of the poets who recognizes this change when he explains the nature of Romantic and Victorian poetry that he, along with other African poets of this era, was introduced to. He described poetry in English as precise and structured in lines that are carefully measured in words from one side of the page to the other (Clark 17). This suggests a significant shift in how poets in Africa began to perceive poetry after this discovery. The English poems that emerged on the page were new to African poets, who not only started writing their poetry down like the Europeans but also began composing in languages that were unfamiliar to them. These African poets were termed in Susan Kiguli's study on the development of form in African poetry as "the first generation of post-colonial African poets" and included notable figures who wrote in the late 1950s through the mid-1960s, such as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Okot p'Bitek, Gabriel Okara, and John Pepper Clark (Kiguli 20).

In East Africa, Okot p'Bitek is considered the first major poet in the region to write in English (Goodwin 154). Although his preference for writing was in his language, Acoli, Okot p'Bitek was influenced to translate arguably the most famous of his works, *Song of Lawino*, to English. In an interview conducted by Lee Nichols, Okot explained how his Acoli version of *Song of Lawino* was translated into English. He mentioned that he initially translated just a small portion of the poem so that he could present it at a cultural festival in Nairobi, and that part of the poem got an overwhelmingly positive reception, so much that several publishers wanted to publish it (Nichols 244). This influenced Okot to translate the whole poem (*Song of Lawino*) into English, which, to him, might not have been the best decision. In his words:

“So I translated the whole thing. Well rather mistranslated the whole thing because I think the Acoli version is the strongest. And incidentally too the last verse in the Acoli edition couldn’t come through in English. So I gave up. So the English version is much shorter” (Nichols 244).

Okot p’Bitek asserted that the English version of Song of Lawino was a mistranslation of the original Acoli text because he had to omit certain elements during the translation process. Okot’s statement implies that although the first generation of post-colonial African poets enthusiastically embraced the idea of writing African poetry in English, translating some of these poems left them incomplete and lacking the full meaning compared to the original versions. This was true for most African poems initially performed in African languages and later translated into English, presenting a significant challenge for the first generation of post-colonial African poets. Consequently, it is not surprising that decolonial thinkers like Ngũgĩ contend that literature from Africa written in the languages of the colonial powers should not be classified as African literature but rather as “Afro-European literature” (Ngũgĩ 27). The discourse surrounding language and African literature is both extensive and complex, and this study will not delve deeply into it. However, I feel it is essential to briefly address this issue in this section to illuminate one of the major challenges in the development of African poetry and literature.

Daniel Olowookere, in discussing *The Nature of Modern African Poetry*, argues that the first generation of post-colonial African poets engaged with literature influenced by Western ideologies. He claims that many poems from this generation “lack African aesthetics, and those that seem to possess them tend to romanticize European culture” (Olowookere 160). This perspective, in a sense, supports Ngũgĩ’s description of these poems, as well as the literature produced by the first generation of post-colonial African poets, as “Afro-European literature.” Olowookere’s argument may not adequately consider the lack of autonomy that this generation

experienced. It is crucial to recognize that for the first time, this generation of African poets encountered a continent of colonial powers that viewed themselves as inherently superior, and for these poets, the most they could do was to honor European culture through their writing. The first generation of post-colonial African poets shared various insights regarding their poetry, particularly its heavy focus on European culture; nevertheless, they cleverly utilized the resources available to them to craft their poetry, paving the way for subsequent generations to continue the evolution of African poetry.

This first generation of post-colonial African poets ushered in a new wave represented by what Kiguli refers to as “the second generation of post-independence African poets,” who wrote between the 1980s and 1990s (Kiguli 20). This study extends the timeline for this generation of poets slightly further to around 2005 because, since her study was published in the 1990s, when the second generation’s timeline ended, extending it to 2005 provides a fuller picture of how these poets’ work evolved in the years immediately following. Some poets from this generation also gained greater recognition or influence in the early 2000s, and therefore, expanding the study allows for the examination of how their voices remained relevant or shifted in response to new contexts.

The second generation of post-independence African poets found themselves somewhat better positioned than their predecessors, as they learned to shape their poetry in the colonizers’ language to address more African themes. These poets primarily focused on written poetry, with a few also creating poetry intended for performance; even so, it is recognized that written African poetry was influenced by “both African oral traditional forms and Western poetic forms” (Kiguli 10). Kiguli names several poets from the second generation of post-independence African poets while

discussing the significant concerns of Ugandan poets. She mentions figures such as Jane Okot p'Bitek, Frank Anywar Ojera, Okot Benge, Susan Kiguli, and David Rubadiri ("Ugandan" 126-130). Other notable poets include Kofi Awoonor, Chris Abani, Zaynab Alkali, Eugene Anang, Sipho Sepamla, Jack Mapanje, Steve Chimombo, Frank Chipasula, Tanure Ojaide, and Niyi Osundare, among others.

Kiguli further explores the characteristics and essence of the poetry from the second generation of post-independence poets and notes that although this generation has used form to express oral traditional modes more noticeably, they still heavily rely on Western literary traditions to innovate and experiment within their poetry (Kiguli 11). It becomes clear that African poetry, for both generations of post-colonial and post-independence African poets, as well as the subsequent generation soon to be discussed, is rooted in African oral traditions and Western literary traditions for its development.

Beyond Kiguli's foundational categorisation of African poetry into two broad generations, other scholars have offered more historically layered and ideologically inflected mappings that further illuminate the evolution of African poetic expression. Tanure Ojaide and Sule Egya, in particular, extend the generational discourse by foregrounding shifts in aesthetic orientation, political commitment, and modes of poetic engagement, especially in response to post-independence disillusionment and authoritarian governance.

Ojaide situates the emergence of modern African poetry within a continuum that reflects Africa's changing socio-political realities. He identifies an early generation of poets, emerging around the period of independence, whose work was largely shaped by cultural nationalism and the desire to reclaim African identity from colonial misrepresentation ("New Trends" 4-5). While these poets

affirmed African history, myth, and spirituality, Ojaide observes that their poetry often bore strong imprints of European modernist aesthetics acquired through colonial education systems (6). Consequently, poetic obscurity, dense symbolism, and formal complexity became defining features of this early phase.

However, Ojaide argues that subsequent generations of poets increasingly rejected this aesthetic orientation as African societies entered periods of political betrayal, economic decline, and social unrest. The failure of post-independence leadership necessitated a shift in poetic function from cultural affirmation to social interrogation and protest (7–9). Poets writing from the mid-1970s onward adopted a more accessible language, privileging clarity, orality, and rhetorical force in order to speak directly to the lived experiences of ordinary people (10–12). For Ojaide, this marks a generational transition in which poetry becomes explicitly utilitarian, aligning itself with the struggles of the masses rather than elite literary circles.

This generational shift is further deepened by Ojaide's conceptualisation of the poet as a moral and visionary figure. In *"I Want to Be an Oracle: My Poetry and My Generation,"* Ojaide frames his generation as one burdened with the responsibility of truth-telling in an era where oppression emanates from within the postcolonial state rather than from external colonial forces ("Oracle" 16–18). The poet, cast as an oracle, assumes the role of witness, conscience, and social critic, exposing corruption, ecological devastation, and state violence (18–20). This framing underscores a generational consciousness in which poetry is inseparable from ethical commitment and public accountability.

Sule Egeya extends this discussion by theorising what he terms a third generation of African, specifically Nigerian poets, whose work emerges under prolonged military dictatorship and

intensified state repression (Egya 13–15). Egya argues that this generation is defined less by chronology than by shared historical experience, particularly censorship, political violence, and economic precarity. Poetry produced within this context is overtly dissident, marked by anger, urgency, and a confrontational stance toward power.

According to Egya, third-generation poets do not merely describe social conditions; rather, their poetry functions as political action embedded within struggles over authority and representation (36–38). This generation inherits the socially engaged impulse of earlier poets but radicalises it through more direct modes of address, heightened emotional intensity, and a strong emphasis on resistance. Crucially, Egya highlights the importance of performance, public readings, and alternative publishing spaces such as campus venues, newspapers, and self-published chapbooks as defining features of this generational moment (74–76). These modes of circulation allow poetry to bypass institutional gatekeeping and engage audiences immediately and viscerally.

Egya's emphasis on performance is particularly significant for contemporary African poetry, as it foregrounds the embodied, oral, and communal dimensions of poetic expression. In this sense, third-generation poetry blurs the boundary between written text and performed utterance, positioning the poet simultaneously as artist, activist, and public intellectual. The poem becomes not only a literary artefact but a lived event situated within concrete socio-political struggles.

Taken together, Ojaide and Egya complicate and expand earlier generational mappings of African poetry by demonstrating how poetic form, language, and function evolve in response to historical pressures. Their scholarship reveals a trajectory in which African poetry moves from cultural reclamation, through social critique, to overt dissidence and performative resistance. This expanded generational framework is particularly useful for contextualising contemporary African

poets whose work straddles the written and performed, the aesthetic and the political, and the individual and the communal.

Shifting the focus back to Kiguli, her examination of two generations of African poets significantly contributed to this study by not only identifying the distinct generational categories but also providing a comprehensive analysis of their poetry, particularly the selected poets of the second generation of post-independence African poets. Nevertheless, her study stops at the second generation of African poets from the 1980s to the 1990s, the period during which her research was conducted. This study extends Kiguli's discourse by proposing a third generation of African poets that emerged around 2007 and continues to the present, which I refer to as the spoken word generation of African poets, with the central poet in this discussion positioned within this category.

The spoken word generation of African poets is a young one, and these poets, including Kagayi, have discovered the power that lies within words and live performance. Their strength is in spoken word, still drawing from both the rich oral and Western literary traditions. These poets write and perform poetry aimed at transformation. It is not difficult to identify these poets, whether from the stage or their names, as some prefer to add the phrase "the poet" after their first names, such as 'Devis the poet' or 'Lus the poet,' while others drop their names entirely and go by nicknames. Scholars like Kiguli, Ojaide, among others, have written and continue to write about the first and second generations of African poets and the nature of their poetry, but the spoken word generation of African poets has not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. This study contributes to the existing body of work on the spoken word generation of African poets, with a particular focus on Kagayi, one of the spoken word poets in Uganda who has made a significant impact on spoken word and performance poetry, and indeed, on the literature of Uganda.

1.1.2. Spoken Word Poetry and Performance

Kagayi, as a writer, brings his poetry to life through performance as well as the written word. His primary focus is on performance poetry or spoken word poetry. It is therefore important to have a history of what is regarded as spoken word and performance poetry in the African and Ugandan context.

The best way to describe spoken word, in my opinion, is in the words of R.H. Kim:

Spoken word as an activist form reveals itself as a generative cultural force and capacity. It is a restless kind of literacy that can teach us much about the possibilities for decolonization in the cultivation and preparation of a next generation of writers, arts activists, critical educators, and community organizers. (Kim 394)

I am drawn to Kim's depiction of spoken word because it directly addresses social and political change through activism. In my exploration of African poetry, I position Kagayi within the spoken word generation of African poets, as much of his work, both written and performed, centers on activism, as Kim suggests. Spoken word poetry represents a form of reform poetry embraced by a new generation of African poets, grounded in the pursuit of socio-political change.

In her discussion of spoken word performance, Crystal Leigh Endsley points out the importance of both the audience and the performer in making meaning of a poem. She calls for cooperation in imagining new ways to address social issues (Endsley 114). Spoken word poetry relies on the involvement of the audience and performer in making meaning of a poem. Bash Fahad Mutumba, in the Daily Monitor dated Friday, July 14, 2023, paraphrases Martha Byoga's understanding of spoken word as "a form of artistic impression where poetry or storytelling is presented in a theatre-style performance manner" (Mutumba).

In the preface of *The Spoken Word Project*, spoken word is defined as a poetry performance that relies entirely on the power of speech, without any stage objects or melody (Doellgast 9). Brigitte Doellgast firmly believes in the strength of words. Several young and emerging poets in Uganda and across Africa have recognized the impact that words can have and have directed their work toward spoken word. Even in the absence of props and music, as Doellgast suggests, the presence of the poet, a microphone, and the audience still indicates that spoken word is a performance. Kagayi has garnered acclaim as a performer and spoken word poet. His performance poems, *No Speaking Vernacular* and *For My Negativity*, have been presented with him as the performer, regardless of the presence or absence of a microphone and audience, undeniably categorizing him as a spoken word and performance poet.

Spoken word has been heavily linked with ‘slam poetry’ and ‘open mic’, which are genres performed widely in the United States of America. In agreement with this, Mbongiseni Buthelezi et.al explore the hybrid nature of spoken word poetry. While it is accepted that spoken word in Africa has been influenced by ‘slam poetry’ and ‘open mic’, its greatest influence is from the oral traditions in Africa (Buthelezi et.al 19). With a robust history of oral poetry among the various ethnic groups in Africa, from praise poetry, songs, poems of abuse, and performance-based poetry, the current generation of African poets tap into the creative pool of this oral poetry to stimulate their creativity through spoken word poetry. Orality can therefore be looked at as the foundation of spoken word poetry in Africa, acting as a reservoir through which spoken word poets of the spoken word generation of African poets draw their creativity.

In his influential work *Story, Performance, and Event*, Richard Bauman articulates the concept of oral performance as a nuanced form of communication deeply embedded in particular contexts. He asserts that performance is not merely a static presentation; rather, it is a dynamic and

situational act where verbal artistry takes on a fundamental social significance (Bauman 3–5). In the context of Uganda, this idea is vividly exemplified by the spoken word artistry of poets such as Kagayi. Their craft transcends the boundaries of pre-written scripts, embodying a spontaneous, interactive experience that unfolds in real-time. It is a moment-bound expression, characterized by a fluid engagement between the audience and the performer. Through a rich interplay of gestures, variations in tone, poignant silences, and responsive dialogue, both performers and spectators coalesce to create meaning together. This inherent connection transforms performance into a vital political arena as well as a platform for poetic exploration, where voices rise not only to entertain but also to challenge, inspire, and provoke thought within the community. Thus, the act of performance poetry and spoken word emerges as a powerful conduit for cultural expression and social commentary in Uganda.

In another significant scholarly contribution, titled *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, Richard Bauman conceptualizes performance as a socially constituted resource. He articulates that performance is not merely an artistic expression but rather a valuable tool that individuals utilize to reflect upon, critique, and transform the social realities they encounter in their daily lives (Bauman xiv–xv). This framework is particularly crucial when delving into the work of Kagayi, who serves as both a performer and an activist. His spoken word artistry transcends mere entertainment; it embodies what Bauman describes as “equipment for living.” This means that Kagayi’s artistic expressions actively engage with pressing social issues such as inadequate governance, systemic inequality, and the pervasive disillusionment felt by today's youth. Through this lens, his performance poetry not only captivates audiences but also serves a far greater purpose by fostering dialogue and inspiring action. Moreover, spoken word naturally aligns with performance poetry, as both forms emphasize the importance of vocal delivery, rhythm, and

audience engagement. The fusion of these two art forms amplifies the impact of the narratives conveyed, reinforcing the connection between art and activism. Consequently, Kagayi's performances resonate deeply, echoing the activist spirits that characterize the new wave of African poets who are redefining cultural narratives through their powerful voices.

Spoken word performance poetry in Africa has continued to grow and spread widely in different cities. It has gained more popularity in the urban areas than in the rural areas in Africa, and this is because revolutions usually emerge in the cities of Africa (Buthelezi et.al 26). Spoken word poets use the power of words to explicate the different challenges faced by the youth, such as unemployment, poverty, inhumanity, and savage treatment by the state, sexuality, and other themes that can spark a revolution against the political mismanagement of African states (26-27). Spoken word poetry thus focuses on themes that guide the African audiences to think deeply about socio-cultural and political issues that affect them, and drive movements for change in the process.

In Uganda, Moses Serubiri traces the rapid development of spoken word poetry from 2007, where “a community of poets, curators, musicians and listeners has emerged in the mainstream” (Serubiri 100). Drawing from the oral literacy traditions among the different ethnic groups in Uganda, poets have been able to create exceptional spoken word works. While Doellgast describes spoken word poetry as poetry performed without music, Serubiri explains that there is a mix of poetry and music while discussing spoken word in Uganda and mentions some of the spoken word poets who appeal to different audiences. He regards Linda Nabasa as a spoken word poet who appeals to an audience of HIV activists and links Jason Ntaro’s spoken word poetry to “readers and writers’ clubs” (Serubiri 100). He also discusses the spoken word poets who are musicians, such as Samson Senkaaba a.k.a. Xenon and Maurice Kirya, among them (100). Like Okot p’Bitek, who masterminded the song school of poetry in Uganda, spoken word poets in Uganda have enlarged

the scope of spoken word poetry, fusing it with music at times. This is gradually making famous the emerging term ‘soetry¹’ under spoken word poetry in Uganda, due to the blending of song and spoken poetry. In some of his works, Kagayi has been able to experiment with the blend of song and spoken word, which is discussed in this study.

Serubiri notes in his discussion the different platforms in Kampala where spoken word poetry is showcased. He mentions Open Mic Uganda, Poetry in Session, and the Lantern Meet of Poets as the place Kagayi discovered his love for poetry (Serubiri 100). More venues in Kampala and other cities like Mbarara and Jinja have given way for more spoken word poets in Uganda to come up and speak about the different issues affecting the country. Most of these spoken word poets meet in the late evenings and nights of different days and venues, to perform in front of audiences with different themes provided for every meeting, and create space for debate. Among these, the Kelele² Arts Foundation is an umbrella for three poetry spaces; Kelele at Makerere University convenes biweekly on Fridays outside the Art Gallery at Makerere University during the semester, Kelele at Mulago also gathers every other Friday in the Dental Auditorium of Uganda Institute of Allied Health and Management Sciences, and Kelele at MUST³ that holds meetings on Fridays, also occurring on a fortnightly basis in the Pharmacology Lecture Theatre of Mbarara University of Science and Technology.

¹ *Soetry* is a term coined by contemporary Ugandan poets to describe a hybrid spoken-word form that fuses elements of song and poetry, foregrounding rhythm, melody, and musicality in poetic performance.

² The phonetic pronunciation for Kelele is /keh-LEH-leh/

³ MUST stands for Mbarara University of Science and Technology

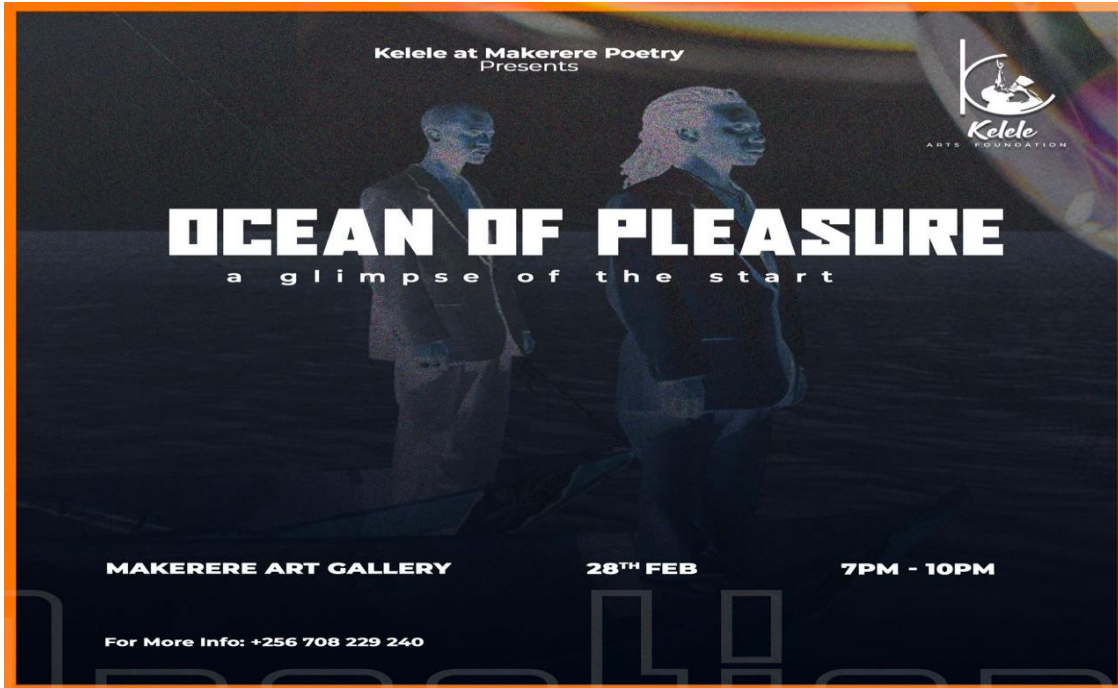


Figure 1: Kelele at Makerere flyer advertising a poetry show at the Makerere Art Gallery



Figure 2: Kelele at Mulago flyer advertising a poetry show at UIAHMS, Mulago

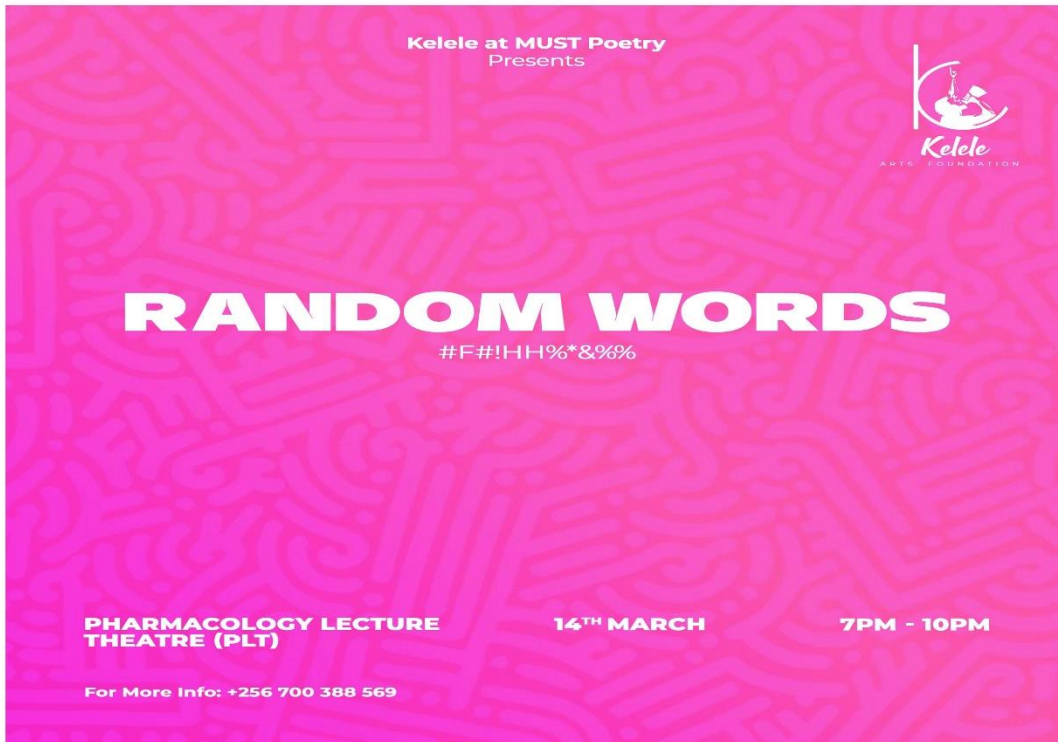


Figure 3: Kelele at MUST flyer advertising a poetry show at the Pharmacology Lecture Theatre.

Additionally, Makerere Institute of Social Research hosts monthly poetry shows every last Thursday of the month at the Okot p’Bitek Pavilion in Makerere University, and another show that takes place every Thursday with music at the University Guest House is Milege⁴. In addition, Wild Coffee Bar, on the 7th Street Industrial Area in Kampala, showcases spoken word poets every Monday and these poetry shows are famously called “Open Mic Chill Monday”.

⁴ The phonetic pronunciation for Milege is /mee-LEH-geh/

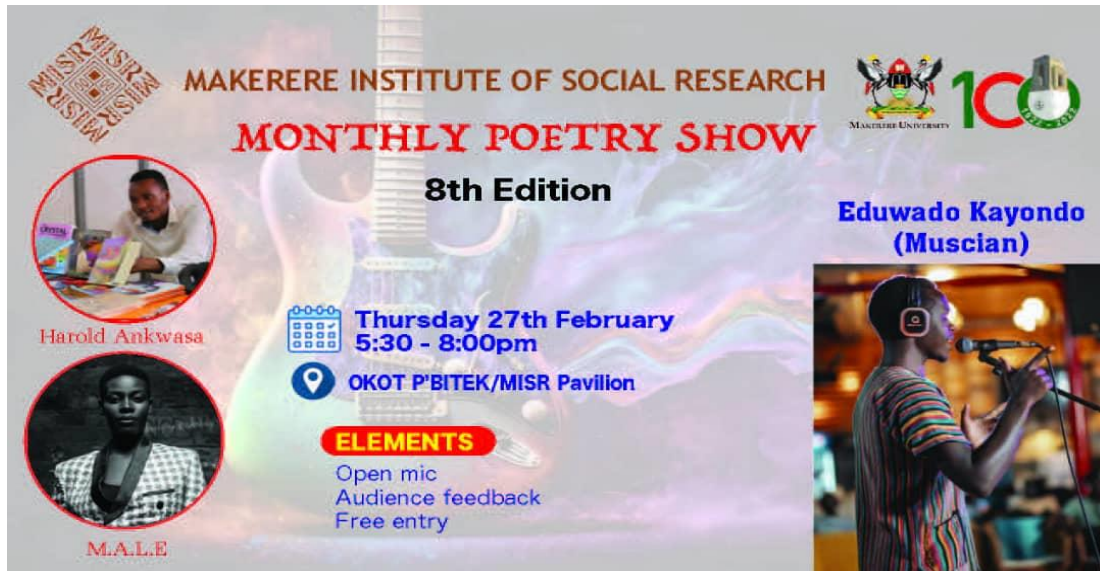


Figure 4: Flyer advertising the monthly poetry show at MISR⁵



Figure 5: Chill Monday flyer advertising a poetry show at Wild Coffee Bar

In Jinja, spoken word poets convene every Tuesday for Jinja Open Mic at the Jinja Railway Museum. The Nile Poets of Jinja, Spoken, Creative Sundays, Luwafu Road Press, Utenzi Night, Mitch's Manifest, among others, also happen, although the schedules are not regular. These poetry

⁵ MISR – Makerere Institute of Social Research

gatherings attract audiences, and the blend of poetry and song creates spaces for interactions between the performer and audience. Kagayi, the poet who is central to the discussion in this study, often features in most of these poetry shows.



Figure 6: Kagayi Ngobi performing a spoken word poem at the Okot p'Bitek Pavilion in MISR at Makerere University

The spoken word, in its essence, is fundamentally incomplete without the element of performance. While some scholars have attempted to draw distinctions between spoken word and performance poetry, I contend that the two forms are inseparable, two tongues of the same flame, inextricably linked in their purpose and effect. In examining the compelling works of Kagayi, I am particularly captivated by the seamless fusion of both spoken word and performance poetry. This fusion transcends mere artistic expression; it serves as a powerful tool for engagement, intervention, and transformative change within society. Kagayi's poems are not simply words on a page; rather, they are lived experiences, vibrantly spoken and fully embodied in the presence of the audience. He

does not merely recite his words; he embodies them, inviting listeners into the very heart of his message.

I advocate the fusion of spoken word and performance poetry because, within the contexts of Uganda and broader African cultures, such a synthesis reflects our indigenous artistic traditions with greater authenticity and depth. Historically, from the griots of West Africa to the Imbongi of the Xhosa people, and across a vast array of praise poets and village storytellers, the African artist has always performed their voice with vigor and purpose. The spoken word has never been merely heard; it has been felt deeply within the rhythm of the body, the expressive gesture of the hands, the intimate gaze of the eyes, and the resonant vibration in one's chest. Kagayi's poetry stands resolutely in this lineage, modernized yet fundamentally connected to its roots.

Furthermore, I embrace this fusion because it offers a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of Kagayi's multifaceted role as both a poet and a performer-activist. His work defiantly refuses confinement, neither on the written page nor on the performance stage alone. By conceptualizing spoken word and performance poetry as a unified expressive field, I was better equipped to capture the full dimension of his artistry and the fundamental impact of his work. As Kim suggests, Kagayi's poetry embodies a "restless kind of literacy" (394), and it is only through the dynamic synergy of voice, body, and presence that this essential restlessness can be fully appreciated. In fusing these two forms, I create a scholarly space to study poetry not merely as static text but as a living, breathing encounter that forges connections between the artist, the audience, and society. This intersectionality is crucial, as performance asserts the urgency and vitality of the spoken word, a notion reinforced by scholars like Charles Harris who emphasize the imperative of performance in poetry's reception and meaning (Harris 135).

Arguably, by embracing the inseparability of spoken word and performance poetry within the framework of Kagayi's work, I not only pay homage to Uganda's rich oral traditions but also highlight the essential nature of performance in creating a transformative poetic experience that resonates deeply within the fabric of our communities.

1.1.3. Kagayi Ngobi in Context

Lawyer, author, performance poet, theatre practitioner, teacher, and publisher (Bwojji), Kagayi was born on 30th November 1986 in Jinja district in Uganda and was named Peter Kagayi by his parents, David Alimwinziga and Ruth Namusobya.

Kagayi began his primary education in 1991 at Old Kampala Primary School. He then transferred to Reverend John Foundation School in 1994 to continue in Primary Four, before briefly returning to Old Kampala Primary School for one term in 1995. From 1995 to 1999, Kagayi went to Kamuli Primary School in Kamuli district, where he completed his primary education. He joined Naalya S.S.S. Namugongo in 2001 and left the school at the end of 2003, after completing his Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) examinations. He then joined St. Mary's Kitende for his Uganda Certificate of Education (UACE) from 2004 to 2005, and his successful completion of Secondary education led him to Makerere University to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Law (B.Laws) from 2006 to 2011.

Having graduated as a lawyer, Kagayi notes in an interview with Doreen Nanziri that, however much he is a lawyer, it is not what he practices. Instead, he practices poetry (Nanziri). Kagayi was a teacher and poetry coach at Nabisunsa Girl's School from 2011 to 2018, President of the Lantern Meet of Poets between 2013 and 2014, Anglophone Programs Coordinator WRITIVISM from 2014 to 2015 where he benchmarked literary programs at Story Moja Festival, Nairobi (2014) and

from 2015 to date, he has been serving as Founding Director and Team Leader of Kitara Nation, a poetry company that he, along with four other friends founded and have used to popularize poetry among young people in Uganda through the poetry projects they conduct. This employment record elevated his passion for poetry, which to him is a way of memorizing the history of his people (Short Story Day Africa).

With over twelve years of creative writing experience, he has worked on six plays, published four poetry collections, and published twenty-five books by other authors so far. He gave up his law practice in 2011 after realizing a gap in the way Ugandan stories were being told, and that year, he decided to become a teacher of literature and poetry in high schools across Uganda. This is when he noticed an even bigger gap in Uganda's education system, which did not prepare young people to turn their talents into active careers. This was the motivation behind his founding of Kitara Nation. He wanted to equip young emerging artists with skills to re-imagine their agency in shaping Uganda's literary landscape. After this, he went on to start a publishing house where he published nineteen books by young Ugandan emerging artists as well as six others by established authors.

As an author, in 2016, his first poetry collection, *The Headline That Morning and Other Poems*, was published by Sooo Many Stories, and after this, he went on to publish three other poetry collections: *Yellow Pupu Poems* (2017), *For My Negativity* (2018), and *No Speaking Vernacular* (2019).

As a playwright and performer, Kagayi has featured in Uganda, Kenya, Sweden, and Germany. His plays include: *The Audience Must Say Amen*, *No Speaking Vernacular*, and *Arrest the Poem*. Most recently, his one-man show *For My Negativity* was the opening act for the 9th edition of the 2022 Kampala International Theatre Festival after a two-year COVID-19 hiatus. It is critical to

mention that most of his performances/plays begin life as poems. This cements his place in the literary field as a performance poet. Kagayi also acted in the play *Ground Control* at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Germany in 2022, participating in the Bridgeworks Artlab in 2022. He co-directed, co-wrote, and acted in the play *Romeo and Juliet in Kampala*, produced by Bridgeworks e.V from 2019 to 2021, which was performed in Cologne, Germany.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Performance poetry and spoken word have received increasing attention within African literary discourse, particularly as tools for activism, resistance, and socio-political commentary. Scholars such as Crystal Leigh Endsley and Mbongiseni Buthelezi have explored the rise of spoken word in urban African contexts, often framing it as a response to youth disillusionment and state failure. In the Ugandan context, however, there remains a noticeable gap in critical scholarship that critically examines the artistic and political work of performance poets like Kagayi, especially in terms of how their poetry, both written and performed, engages with the lived realities of post-independence Uganda.

While Kagayi has gained wide recognition through media platforms, literary festivals, and as the founder of Kitara Nation, a platform that nurtures poetic voices in Uganda, much of the attention he has received has been celebratory rather than analytical. Existing discussions tend to highlight his charisma, activism, or biographical journey, without offering in-depth academic inquiry into the poetic craft, performative strategies, or socio-political interventions embedded in his work.

This study moves beyond surface-level appreciation by closely examining how Kagayi's poetry, both on the page and in performance, articulates and critiques the socio-cultural and political issues confronting Uganda today. Through this dual lens of performance and text, the study interrogates

how his poetic language, oral aesthetics, and public engagement reflect, respond to, and possibly reshape societal realities. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to broader conversations on how African poetry functions not only as art but also as a medium of resistance, education, and change in post-independence contexts.

1.3. Study Objectives

1.3.1. General Objective

This study aims to analyze how Kagayi's poetry represents socio-cultural and political change in Uganda.

1.3.2. Specific Objectives

1. To investigate Kagayi's performed poetry as a performative text and living art.
2. To examine the dominant stylistic features of Kagayi's written poetry and their role in shaping his socio-cultural and political perceptions.
3. To analyze the thematic representation of socio-cultural and political change in Kagayi Ngobi's poetry.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How does Kagayi Ngobi's performed poetry function as a performative text and a form of living art?
2. What dominant features characterize Kagayi's written poetry, and how do they contribute to the shaping of his socio-cultural and political perceptions?
3. In what ways does Kagayi's poetry represent themes of socio-cultural and political change in post-independence Uganda?

1.5. Justification of the Study

The rationale for this study stems from the noticeable paucity of academic scholarship on Kagayi's poetry, despite his growing stature as one of Uganda's most prominent and widely celebrated performance poets. While Kagayi has received substantial public attention through media platforms, interviews, and literary events, critical literary engagement with both his written and performed poetry remains limited. This study addresses that gap by offering a detailed academic examination of Kagayi's poetic oeuvre and his interventions in Uganda's socio-cultural and political landscape.

Given the centrality of performance in Kagayi's poetic expression, this study investigates how his work functions not only as artistic expression but also as a vehicle for activism and public engagement. By analyzing how his poetry engages with the realities of post-independence Uganda, the study contributes to the broader discourse on African literature's role in confronting power structures, shaping public consciousness, and calling for change.

This research is especially relevant at a time when performance poetry is increasingly becoming a powerful tool for civic dialogue and cultural resistance across Uganda and Africa. Kagayi's work offers a unique opportunity to interrogate how poetic form, performance, and language converge to reflect and reshape contemporary Ugandan realities. The study therefore enriches existing scholarship on performance poetry and spoken word, particularly within East Africa, and formally situates Kagayi within academic discussions as a socially conscious poet whose art demands critical attention.

1.6. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by ideas on decoloniality, alongside performance theory. The use of both decolonial and performance theories assisted in thinking through the complex interplay between performer, audience, text, context, and decoloniality.

1.6.1. Decolonial Theory

While discussing the history of decoloniality, Catherine E. Walsh places its genesis in the Americas and perspicuously notes its focus as resistance against the repercussions of both internal and external colonialism on the establishment of power (Walsh 16). Decoloniality thus focuses on the premise of shared power, with freedom of expression of ideas in equal measure and amount. Decolonial thinkers denounce the thought that the (ex-) colonized are unable to think and create knowledge on their own. Walsh notes thus:

Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking, knowing, being and doing that began with, but also precede, the colonial enterprise and invasion. It implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchal structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality and thought, structures that are clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western Modernity. (Walsh 17)

Walsh further elaborates that:

Decoloniality, in this sense, is not a static condition, an individual attribute, or a lineal point of arrival or enlightenment. Instead, decoloniality seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought. (17)

Walter D. Mignolo simplifies the concept of “decolonial thinking” by specifying that this whole concept is anchored by “coloniality – the darker side of Western modernity” (Mignolo 106-107).

In linguistic terms, the term ‘decolonial’ is a result of ‘colonial’ when the smallest unit of meaning,

the prefix “de-”, is acknowledged for its functionality; to reverse or to remove. “Decoloniality” then intelligibly means to remove or reverse coloniality or even subvert coloniality.

A major problem identified by decolonial thinkers is that colonization greatly impacted the global community, and for the process of decolonization to fully take place, attaining an understanding of how the colonized states were affected is key to finally achieving decolonization. Nelson Maldonado-Torres maintains this thought through his elaborations on decoloniality:

The decolonial turn does not refer to a single theoretical school, but rather points to a family of diverse positions that share a view of coloniality as a fundamental problem in the modern (as well as postmodern and information) age, and of decolonization or decoloniality as the necessary task that remains unfinished. (Maldonado-Torres 2)

Decoloniality is often associated with the terms decolonization and decolonial, which imply several ideas, including, but not limited to, the effects of colonialism, a need to question Western modernity, a period of return, reconstruction, and restitution, resistance to the ideas of racism, imperialism, and capitalism (Mukherjee and Quayson 3). Generally, decolonial thinkers argue that power is a significant concept for discussion concerning decoloniality. Decolonial thinkers focus on shared power rather than having total dominance over another. This need for shared power does not only apply to nation-state politics; it goes deeper into the classroom and the relationship between teacher and student. Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang comments thus:

Another decolonial strategy involves provoking a sustained critique of conventional teaching modes by displacing agency to students, allowing for the interrogation of assumptions that underpin their lived experiences. This strategy was meant to avoid replicating colonialism in the classroom in the scenario where the instructor wielded undue levels of power. The course facilitator, namely the professor, is in the prime position to exercise judgment in shaping the course and content of research and study. We must also trust students with the ability to be responsible sharers of this power. (Opoku-Agyemang 224)

According to decolonial thinkers like Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Ngũgĩ, Walsh, and Maldonado-Torres, to achieve decolonization, it is important to remove all aspects that are a constant reminder of Western European supremacy by starting in the classroom. When the student relies on the experiences they have lived through, and not what the colonizer has dictated to them, then this student will feel the impact of what they have lived through on their education and will be set free from a feeling of suppression or lack of power, replaced by a feeling of decoloniality.

The other key argument is that liberation is at the heart of decoloniality, and this freedom unfolds in thought, knowledge, and action (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 28). Decoloniality raises several questions of power that compel thought around these ideas of power: Who has power? Is power based on the colour of skin? Does white mean more powerful? This thought is transformed into knowledge of power, knowledge of the dark side of colonization, and knowledge of freedom that culminates in the action of decoloniality. Anibal Quijano posits the power question and encourages the rejection of all power that does not enable one to think freely for oneself (168-178).

Decolonial thinkers argue that colonization established a power gap between the colonizers and the colonized, which in turn paved the way for domination and slavery. The idea that a group of human beings was superior to another made it possible for colonization to take place, and it is anchored on this that decolonial movements rise to struggle for freedom and liberty.

According to Mignolo, the coloniality of power operated on four domains of control over economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity (Mignolo 15). For the (ex-) colonized to once again take control over their power, they must fight to regain total control of these domains. It is only then that decolonization will be achieved. He posits, “Decoloniality is a double-faced concept. On one side, it points toward the analytics of coloniality, the darker side of modernity. On the other, it points toward building decolonial futures.” (Mignolo 20)

Decoloniality is a theory that has been popularized in the twenty-first century and according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, its focus is not just about politics but also about 'epistemic freedom' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 112). To achieve this freedom, one should be able to depend on one's knowledge and not on the knowledge of the colonial powers. One of the major effects of coloniality was the effect it had on the cognitive mind of the Africans. Their knowledge was undermined and was replaced by the knowledge of their colonial masters. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, there was a need for the Africans to regain and concentrate on their knowledge (112), thus focusing on decolonial theory that would not only question political rule but also place its focus on the freedom of knowledge.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni furthers the discussion of the epistemic crisis when he mentions it as a reason for the emergence of the decolonial theory: "It is mainly because of these systemic, epistemic and ideological crises that decoloniality has emerged as a long standing but suppressed political and epistemological movement aimed at the liberation of (ex-) colonized peoples from global coloniality" (117).

His identification of the three levels of crisis attacking the modern world in the forms of systemic, epistemic, and ideological levels helps us to understand why decoloniality is necessary. To completely free one from coloniality, one had to be free from the three crises facing the world. Decoloniality is a form of resistance against coloniality and colonialism. It is a quest for the oppressed to once again take control of their minds and bodies.

Decoloniality has often been related to Marxist and postcolonial thoughts, and the relation is present in the case of these three ideas. However, the distinction lies in the focus of the problem, and Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues thus:

Whereas Marxism underscored the problem of capitalist as a global challenge, decoloniality identifies colonialism and global coloniality as the major problem.

Marxism gestures towards socialism, while decoloniality pushes for completion of the incomplete project of decolonization. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 19-20)

The idea of decoloniality aims at bringing to an end the ‘racial hierarchization’ and ‘asymmetrical power’ that was brought about by colonization (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 448). The colonial powers presented themselves as greatly civilized and superior to the Africans, and this automatically formed a hierarchy based on race, with the colonial powers at the top.

Decoloniality, therefore, rose to resist this huge chasm of racial segregation and, in doing so, create a sense of equality, giving the Africans back the power that they lost. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that decoloniality is part of a collection of marginalized but persistent movements (117) and makes it clear what decoloniality stands against: “Decoloniality is raged against what Cesaire termed the European fundamental LIE: Colonization=Civilization. It gives the colonized peoples a space in which to judge Eurocentric conceit, deceit and hypocrisy” (Decolonization 134).

Theorists of decoloniality, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, constantly speak of the decolonial turn as a way of moving towards ecologies of “knowledges and universality” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 134). What remains consistent with decoloniality is the aspect of sharing. The decolonial call is to have shared power, knowledge, and being, with an understanding that it is unrealistic to produce knowledge in isolation, but through a network of interactions and perspectives and that there is a need for one world, with one “Zone of existers” that includes all ((ex-) colonizers and (ex-) colonized) not burdened by slavery, racism or superiority. Ndlovu-Gatsheni suggests:

In terms of its horizon, decoloniality gestures towards the construction of the pluriverse. The global South is underscored as rich in resources for pluriversality. Firstly, if one brings into the domain of knowledge the suppressed and displaced knowledges from the global South into the academy and general human life, a “mosaic epistemology” conducive to ecologies of knowledge begins to be constructed. Mobilization and the deployment of non-Western ways

of thinking, doing and acting is at the core of construction of the pluriverse.
(Ndlovu-Gatsheni 136)

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni builds on the ideas of decolonial thinkers like Anibal Quijano, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramon Grosfoguel, Catherine E. Walsh, and Walter D. Mignolo to emphasize his ideas of decoloniality. Like Mignolo and other thinkers who carry on the decolonial ideas, Ndlovu-Gatsheni discusses colonial power and “pedagogies and epistemologies” as the reasons why modernity/colonization refers to an unequal world (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 128). He bases his ideas on Africa, one of the victims of coloniality, to express his thoughts on what Mignolo refers to as “the darker side of Western modernity”. He elaborates thus:

Decoloniality is born out of a realization that the modern world is an asymmetrical world order sustained not only by colonial matrices of power but by pedagogies and epistemologies of equilibrium that continue to produce alienated Africans who are socialized into hating the Africa that produced them and liking the Europe and America that rejected them. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 128)

According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Western modernity blinded Africans, as well as the other victims of colonization, to the point that their own culture and identity became alien to them, and they instead accepted to copy the culture of those who enslaved and tortured them.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni further elaborates on this concept of colonial power over the colonized by referring, through his discussion, to a world with two zones. He discusses a zone for the European and American colonialists, who were, according to their structures, the most powerful on the globe, and this, Gatsheni refers to as a “Zone of being”. The second zone was more of a slave market for those in the first zone, and it is termed as the “Zone of Non-being”. These faced apartheid and colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 128-129).

1.6.2. Performance Theory

Since Kagayi's poetry anchors on performance as a key strategy, this study uses Performance Theory in addition to the theory of Decoloniality. Scholars like Bauman, Schechner, and Turner have defined performance as the involvement of a performer, which can be one or more, the nature of performance that Richard Bauman terms an 'art form', the presence of an audience that defines performance, as well as the setting (Bauman 4). The combination of these elements defines performance, and each of these elements contributes to performance as a whole. A performer critically lays out the performance in words and action. It does not matter whether or not the performer is the creator of the performance, as long as they can perform for an audience and communicate effectively in the process. The audience is present not only to listen but also to actively respond and participate in the performance. The nature of performance involves several things, from the way the performer dresses to the way they use the stage, the nature of the stage, facial and body expressions of the performer, among others. It is also important that the performer pays attention to the time, place, and environment in which to perform to have a constructive performance. Bauman maintains this thought as he elaborates:

Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for a way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence. (Bauman 11)

Performance anchors itself on means of communication that are listed as special codes, figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, special formulae, appeal to tradition, and disclaimer of performance (Bauman 16). The nature of performance relies heavily on Bauman's list for effective communication in performance. At the heart of performance is communication

between the performer and audience concerning what is being performed, which is usually a lived experience. Bauman, in his later work, expands this understanding by framing performance as a culturally reflexive act that helps societies reflect on their norms, values, and ideologies. In *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, he describes performance as “a social form about society, a cultural form about culture, a communicative form about communication,” emphasizing that performance does not merely represent reality but can reshape and critique it (*Folklore* xiv).

Susan Kiguli describes the link between performance and communication more elaborately:

Performance is a communicative process in which the performer, audience and the social practice of both oral poetry and popular song are vital for the interpretation and understanding of these genres. The relationship between performer, composition process, audience, purpose and the overall context in which the performance takes place is central to this study. (Kiguli 37-38)

Oral literature is most impactful in its artistic (performed) form, and people are more interested in the fact that they can actively participate in poetry, song, and drama through performance (Kiguli 17). Effective performance thus depends on the skill of the performer in remembering the story. Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira maintains this assertion, and according to her, the what and how of performance is not only significant but also crucial when she states:

In oral narratives, the artist’s skill is often a question of memory, organization, creation and understanding of the audience. The skill involves remembering certain plots, topics and core clichés and presenting them consistently, with suitable conclusions attached. Some story tellers get confused in the course of their narratives. They may drift from one story to another unintentionally or even drift from one episode to another. They can mistakenly transpose two incidents, especially if they are excited, and this may confuse the listeners. (Kabira 16)

Richard Bauman considers the power performance has in terms of socio-political transformation within society as a reason for performers to be both feared and admired, because of the way they present social issues, possessing the ability to transform the society socially, and because of the skill these performers display in performance respectively (Bauman 45). Performance guides the audience through the performer to a realization of the socio-political injustices that have been blinding them, giving ideas to the audience on how they can transform their status quo. This, in my opinion, creates a link between performance and decoloniality. Both lead to a realization, with decoloniality focusing on the dark side of modernity/colonization, and performance focusing on the postcolonial political, social, and economic situation in the society. The former eventually leads to a removal of colonial ideas, and the latter, knowingly or not, guides both its audience and performer towards ideas of appreciation or transformation.

Kwesi Yankah further asserts the claim above in his statement:

By assuming responsibility to an audience for communicative competence, the verbal art performer submits himself to critical evaluation; but the evaluation here, unlike that in written literature, is not delayed; it is a form of *instant* justice. The audience is the jury, the guardian of the folk aesthetic; and just as the performer is responsible to the audience, the audience is accountable to the culture at large for the exercise of good judgement in instituting rewards if the aesthetic principles of the community are upheld, and assessing penalties if the communal aesthetic is subverted. (Yankah 135)

This provides further insight into the link between performer and audience in performance. The audience must be able to pass judgment, not only on the performer's nature of performance, but to the performance concerning the ideas expressed in the performance. Only then will the aesthetic of performance be appreciated.

The assumption for scholars of performance is that the world is postcolonial, which means it involves a collision of cultures and hybridization in general, which pushes ideas to the people

through the different ideologies, war, religion, disease, government, and internet, among others (Schechner 160). Since what comes out of this is unclear, performance studies point out the value of a performer who meticulously displays the different ideas Schechner identifies, and from this, the performer's audience realizes the postcolonial challenges in their society. I do not dismiss the fact that the process of performance is, to a great extent, amusing and pleasurable; however, the response from the audience to the postcolonial issues presented by the performer, besides the amusement and pleasure, gives performance studies its meaning.

Bauman and Briggs further comment on the critical nature of performance:

As many authors have stressed, performances are not simply artful uses of language that stand apart both from day-to-day life and from larger questions of meaning, as a Kantian aesthetics would suggest. Performance rather provides a frame that invites critical reflection on communicative processes. A given performer is tied to a number of speech events that precede and succeed it (past performances, readings of texts, negotiations, rehearsals, gossip, reports, critiques, challenges, subsequent performances and the like). (Bauman and Briggs 60-61)

Bauman and Briggs here emphasize the interrelationship between the past, the present context, and the actual performance event, thereby locating performance within a continuous chain of social communication rather than treating it as an isolated artistic moment. Performance, in this view, becomes a site of critical reflection, where language is not only aesthetically displayed but also socially examined and politically charged. This perspective is particularly relevant to Kagayi's performance poetry, which constantly draws from earlier political histories, collective memories, urban struggles, and public discourse, while simultaneously generating new meanings within live performance spaces. Kagayi's performances are thus not detached artistic spectacles, but socially embedded events that respond to existing power structures and audience expectations. Through tone, gesture, repetition, and audience interaction, his performances become part of an ongoing

dialogue that extends beyond the performance moment into public debate, digital circulation, and political consciousness. In this way, Bauman and Briggs' theorisation helps to frame Kagayi's poetry as a living communicative process, one that negotiates memory, resistance, and meaning within Uganda's contemporary sociopolitical terrain.

Richard Schechner, in his definition of performance in the arts, notes that the meaning of performance is putting on a show in a play, show, dance, or concert (Schechner 22). This, of course, must involve an audience and the performer in a broader perspective, since a show cannot involve only a performer or just an audience. Schechner continues to argue that "performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body and tell stories" (22).

The functions of performance have been proposed by several cultures, and one of the most noticeable is that performance is a center of knowledge and a space where emotions can be expressed. Schechner's ideas guide this study by coming up with seven functions of performance, with the first being entertainment, followed by creating something beautiful, marking or changing identity, fostering a community, healing, teaching, and dealing with the sacred or demonic (Schechner 38). Performance thus comes up with new ways of thinking about the performer, the aesthetic action and event, the audience, and the surrounding contexts.

Performance is a result of several events coming together to form a whole. It involves a great deal of everything noticed, and some that go unnoticed between the performer and audience, and the performance starts as soon as the first person gets into the "field of performance", to the time the last person leaves. (Schechner 71). I contend that it is important to try to pay attention to every detail in a performance to get the message. It may not be entirely possible for a person in the audience to note every aspect of a performance, from the actions of the performer that may or may not be part of the performance to the end, but by raising important questions like why the

performer, at a certain point in the performance, stands or moves around the stage, raises or lowers his voice, or his hand, the spectator begins to fully comprehend the performance.

Schechner suggests the need for subjectivity in deciding what counts as performance and what counts as everyday life because performance shifts depending on the context, and is therefore “hard to define” (Schechner 87). No rule is based on finding the distinction between performance and everyday life, which calls for performance scholars to think of performance with an open mind, since it is not always clear what the boundaries between performance and life are. This is why it is important to pay special attention to the expression of the performer because performance then gives the audience permission to intensely evaluate the performer and his/her performance (Bauman 293). Erving Goffman maintains this thought through his elaboration on performance:

A performance, in the restricted sense in which I shall now use the term, is that arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer, the latter, in turn, being an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense, and looked to for engaging behavior, by persons in an ‘audience’ role. (Goffman 124)

Performance thus acts as resistance against the misuse of establishments, and the art of involving the audience creates a reality that can criticize the people who are misusing this power. It is therefore important to have an aspect of performance, not only in the genre of theater, but also in poetry, and because Kagayi has focused on the art of performance in poetry, the theory of performance helps in examining his work, and the effect it has on the socio-cultural and political issues in Uganda. Schechner’s ideas are supported by Edwin Wilson’s six elements of performance: the performer, the art of performance, the place of performance, the audience, the makers of the performance, and the text or performed art (Wilson 11-12).

In conclusion, performance theory provides a critical framework for understanding Kagayi's poetic works as dynamic and participatory texts that extend beyond the written word into the realm of embodied experience and social engagement. The theory foregrounds the intricate relationship between the performer, the audience, and the socio-political context, revealing performance as both an aesthetic and ideological act. Scholars such as Bauman, Schechner, Kiguli, and Kabira affirm that performance is not merely an artistic display but a communicative and transformative process that invites reflection, critique, and even resistance. This perspective is especially relevant to Kagayi's poetry, which is deeply anchored in lived Ugandan realities and is performed with a deliberate intention to provoke awareness, challenge power structures, and advocate for change. The performative dimensions of his poetry, voice, gesture, timing, space, and audience interaction are integral to its meaning and impact. Therefore, performance theory is not only applicable but essential to the analysis of Kagayi's work, offering valuable insight into how poetry functions as a living art form with the power to influence socio-cultural and political discourse.

This study found that reliance on a single theoretical framework was insufficient for a nuanced reading of Kagayi's poetry, largely because his work operates at the intersection of aesthetics, embodiment, and political resistance. While decolonial theory provides a critical lens for interrogating the historical and ongoing structures of epistemic violence, linguistic repression, and colonial continuities that Ngobi confronts, it does not fully account for the *how* of his poetic intervention. Ngobi's decolonial project is not articulated solely at the level of thematic content; rather, it is enacted through performance, through voice, gesture, rhythm, repetition, bodily presence, and direct audience engagement. Performance theory, therefore, becomes necessary to examine poetry as an event and a living practice, where meaning is generated through enactment rather than text alone. In Ngobi's case, performance functions as a decolonial strategy: the

performing body becomes a site of resistance, reclaiming silenced histories and marginalized languages while disrupting colonial expectations of literary form and decorum. The two theories are thus deeply interlinked in this study, as performance provides the medium through which decoloniality is made visible, audible, and affective. Read together, performance theory illuminates the embodied mechanisms through which decolonial resistance is staged, while decolonial theory clarifies the political urgency and historical stakes of that performance, making their combined application not only complementary but methodologically necessary for engaging Ngobi's poetry in its fullness.

1.7. Scope of the Study

This study focuses on four poetry collections by Kagayi: *The Headline That Morning and Other Poems* (2016), *Yellow Pupu Poems* (2017), *For My Negativity* (2018), and *No Speaking Vernacular* (2019). These texts form the primary corpus for an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural and political issues explored in Kagayi's poetry. Notably, *For My Negativity* and *No Speaking Vernacular* have been adapted from print into live stage performances, while several poems in Kagayi's debut collection originated as performance pieces before being transcribed into written form.

This duality of media: written and performed, serves as a central lens through which the study investigates the interplay between text and performance. By closely examining how meaning is constructed, emotions are conveyed, and audiences are engaged across both forms, the study illuminates the dynamics of Kagayi's poetic practice as both literary and performative. Ultimately, this approach offers a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the thematic concerns, stylistic choices, and cultural critique embedded in Kagayi's work, affirming his poetry as a powerful tool for socio-political engagement in contemporary Uganda.

1.8. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, a methodological approach that is particularly suitable for the interpretive analysis of literary and performance texts. Qualitative research, as widely articulated in literary and cultural studies, enables the exploration of meaning, representation, power, and ideology within artistic production through detailed textual and contextual interpretation. It prioritises depth, nuance, and critical engagement with texts rather than numerical generalisation. This approach is therefore appropriate for investigating Kagayi's poetry, which operates at the intersection of language, performance, politics, and cultural resistance.

The study was anchored in close reading as a primary analytical method. Close reading, as a formal critical practice, allows for detailed attention to diction, imagery, symbolism, tone, voice, structure, and rhythm in poetic texts. Through this method, individual poems are examined carefully to uncover layers of meaning and ideological positioning embedded in linguistic and stylistic choices. Close reading is particularly relevant to this study because Kagayi's poetry is densely metaphorical and politically encoded, requiring rigorous textual scrutiny to illuminate how meaning is constructed at the level of language.

In addition, the study employed performance analysis as a critical method, drawing on performance theory as articulated by scholars such as Bauman, Schechner, and Turner. Performance analysis enabled the examination of poetry as embodied, enacted, and socially situated art, rather than as a purely written product. This approach focused on elements such as voice, gesture, posture, tone, timing, audience interaction, and the spatial dynamics of performance. Since Kagayi is both a page poet and a performance poet, this method was essential

for understanding how his poetry generates meaning through bodily enactment and live audience engagement, as well as how performance reshapes the interpretation of written texts.

The study further integrated thematic analysis to identify and interpret dominant socio-cultural and political concerns across Kagayi's oeuvre. Through this method, recurring themes such as linguistic repression, urban inequality, environmental degradation, political violence, memory, resistance, and youth disillusionment were systematically traced and analysed. Thematic analysis allowed the study to move beyond isolated textual moments and to establish broader patterns of meaning across multiple poems and performances.

Primary data for this study was drawn from all four published poetry collections, namely: *The Headline That Morning and Other Poems* (2016), *Yellow Pupu Poems* (2017), *For My Negativity* (2018), and *No Speaking Vernacular* (2019). These four collections constituted the entire published body of Kagayi's written poetic output to date, making their selection both comprehensive and methodologically justified. Rather than sampling from a larger body of work, this study engaged with Kagayi's complete published oeuvre to offer a holistic and representative analysis of his poetic vision, thematic evolution, and stylistic experimentation. Working with the full range of his published collections also allowed the study to trace continuities and shifts in his engagement with socio-political reality, language politics, and performance aesthetics over time. Particular focus was placed on poems that exist in both written and performed forms, as these provide the most productive sites for examining the interplay between text and performance, which was central to the objectives of this study.

In addition to written texts, the study made use of supplementary qualitative data, including: Recorded digital performances of Kagayi's poetry, public interviews, media commentaries, and personal observation of performance contexts.

These materials were treated as critical extensions of the primary texts rather than as peripheral data. They enabled the study to analyse how Kagayi articulates his artistic vision, political positioning, and poetic intentions in public discourse, while also allowing for the examination of how audiences respond to and participate in his performances. Digital performances, in particular, were analysed as part of contemporary performance circulation, where meaning was extended beyond the live stage into virtual spaces of political debate and cultural engagement.

The methodological approach of this study was further shaped by decolonial theory and performance theory, which provided the principal interpretive frameworks. Decolonial theory, particularly the work of Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Mignolo, and Maldonado-Torres, informed the analysis of how Kagayi's poetry contests colonial legacies of knowledge, language, and power. Performance theory, on the other hand, enabled the study to conceptualise Kagayi's poetry as a living, embodied, and politically charged practice rather than as a static literary object. By integrating these theoretical perspectives with close reading and performance analysis, the study was able to examine both what Kagayi's poetry says and how it performs its resistance.

By combining close textual analysis, performance analysis, and thematic interpretation within a qualitative research framework, this study offered a rigorous and multidimensional approach to Kagayi's poetry. This methodological design not only aligned with established critical practices in literary and performance studies but also responded to the contemporary reality of African spoken word poetry as a hybrid form that moves between page, stage, and digital platforms. The study,

therefore, contributes methodologically to Ugandan literary scholarship by demonstrating how performance poetry can be examined as both a textual and an embodied cultural practice.

1.9. Ethical Considerations

This study explored the poetry of Kagayi Ngobi in both its performed and written forms, with particular attention to how his work engaged socio-cultural and political issues within the Ugandan context. Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were carefully observed to ensure respect for the poet, scholarly integrity, and the protection of intellectual and cultural property.

The study relied exclusively on Kagayi's published poems and publicly accessible performances. In keeping with ethical research practice, all primary and secondary sources were fully acknowledged and cited using the Modern Language Association (MLA) referencing style. No unpublished manuscripts were consulted, and no performances were reproduced, transcribed, or circulated beyond their publicly available formats without authorization. This approach ensured that the poet's creative ownership was respected and that his work was engaged with in a manner consistent with academic and ethical standards.

Particular ethical sensitivity arose in relation to language and translation. Some of the poems under study incorporated indigenous Ugandan languages and multilingual expressions whose meanings, rhythms, and cultural nuances could not be fully captured through direct translation into English. Where translation was necessary, assistance was sought from translators familiar with the relevant languages and cultural contexts. However, the translation process itself revealed ethical and interpretive challenges. Translators often observed that certain poems carried greater emotional force, aesthetic depth, and cultural resonance in their original languages than in English translation. As the researcher was not fully proficient in these languages, it was at times difficult to work

around these linguistic and cultural gaps without risking distortion or oversimplification of meaning.

In response to this challenge, the study approached translated material with caution and reflexivity, acknowledging the limits of translation and avoiding definitive claims where linguistic nuance might have been compromised. Rather than treating translations as neutral equivalents, they were considered interpretive approximations shaped by language, culture, and performance context. This awareness informed the analytical approach and reinforced the decision to foreground performance, tone, embodiment, and context alongside textual meaning.

Overall, the study maintained an ethically responsible stance by recognizing the complexities of language, power, and representation in literary scholarship. By remaining transparent about methodological limitations and respecting the integrity of the poet's work, the research upheld ethical accountability while contributing meaningfully to discussions on Ugandan poetry, performance, and cultural expression.

1.10. Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Introduction and Background to the Study

1.0. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

1.2. Statement of the Problem

1.3. Study Objectives

1.4. Research Questions

1.5. Justification of the Study

1.6. Theoretical Framework

1.7. Scope of the Study

1.8. Research Methodology

1.9. Ethical Considerations

1.10. Chapter Outline

1.11. Conclusion

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Chapter Three: Kagayi's Performed Poetry as Performative Text and Living Art

Chapter Four: Crafting Meaning in Kagayi Ngobi's Written Poetry: A Ugandan Aesthetic Perspective

Chapter Five: Memory, Struggle, and Social Awakening in Kagayi's Poetry

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

1.11. Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the research by providing the background and context within which Kagayi's poetry emerges, particularly highlighting the socio-cultural and political landscape of

Uganda. It has outlined the central problem the study seeks to address: the limited academic attention given to the performance dimension of Kagayi's poetry and its role in negotiating socio-political meaning. The chapter presented the main research objective and its specific sub-objectives, each geared toward uncovering the interplay between written and performed poetry in the quest for social change.

To guide the inquiry, the chapter has posed critical research questions that the subsequent chapters explore. It also underscored the significance of the study, not only for literary scholars and students but also for educators, cultural practitioners, and policy advocates, by emphasizing the value of performance poetry in shaping public discourse. The chapter has further explained the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis, drawing from performance theory and decolonial theory to examine the poetic texts as both aesthetic and activist engagements.

In addition, the scope of the study has clearly been defined, limiting the analysis to four of Kagayi's poetry collections, two of which are closely associated with public performance. The chapter has also articulated the research methodology, including thematic and literary analysis, while emphasizing the critical reading of both texts and performances. Ethical considerations were taken into account, especially concerning intellectual property and respectful engagement with the poet's published works. The subsequent chapter undertakes a comprehensive review of the extant literature to delineate the existing knowledge landscape and identify pertinent gaps that this study addresses.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0. Introduction

This chapter presents a critical survey of existing literature relevant to the thematic and theoretical concerns of this study. The review contextualizes the research within broader scholarly conversations and identifies key areas where the present inquiry contributes new insights. Drawing on interdisciplinary frameworks and African-centered perspectives, this chapter foregrounds the evolving discourses on performance poetry, particularly as it relates to oral traditions, political engagement, and social transformation.

2.1. Oral Poetry and Performance

Positioning Kagayi as a poet who is performing and writing requires an overarching study of the background of oral poetry in Africa. Ruth Finnegan is one of the scholars who pays close attention to the background of oral poetry in Africa. She traces the history of the oral poets to four kinds of association. The first is the association with the royal courts and these poets, she discusses, were rewarded as professional poets. The other poets were more private and depended on their ability to play with words while moving from one place to another to receive recognition as performers. The rest of the oral poets lived off farming but were noticed for their ability to perform on occasions that were considered exceptional. While in other African contexts, some poets were not differentiated from the rest of the people (Finnegan 84). Finnegan gives several scholars of oral literature foundational knowledge of how oral poets were seen in different African societies to understand how far the oral poets have come. She discusses the nature of oral poetry and performance for the different kinds of poets who were distributed in different ways in African

societies. Her study on the poets of the courts, religious and freelance performers who she regarded as semi-professionals and professionals, and the less-professional oral poets, who usually earned their living in other ways (Finnegan 84-106) sketches out the origins of oral poetry and performance, which greatly benefits this study on Kagayi as an African performer.

In a different yet closely related discussion of oral literature, Finnegan distinguishes between “oral” and “written” literature to appreciate oral literature as an art form. She argues that one way to differentiate between oral and written literature is by examining the cultural context of the African society in which the literature exists. When all production, performance, and consumption of literature are communicated, the literature is considered oral, resulting in a “total absence of literacy” (Finnegan 52). In this discussion, Finnegan explains what oral literature is and what sets it apart from written literature. Her work provides this study with a foundation to examine the poetry of Kagayi in both written and performed forms. However, since she does not illustrate this discussion through an analysis of specific oral poems, this study provides a critical example that clarifies Finnegan’s explanation by analyzing Kagayi’s written and performed poetry in detail.

Karin Judith Barber also addresses the distinction between text and performance in “Text and Performance in Africa.” She states:

In written literary traditions, the distinction between text and performance seems self-evident. The text is the permanent artefact, hand-written or printed, while the performance is the unique, never-to-be-repeated realization or concretization of the text, a realization that ‘brings the text to life’ but which is itself doomed to die on the breath in which it is uttered. Text fixes, performance animates. (Barber 324)

Barber’s formulation underscores the complementary yet tension-filled relationship between permanence and ephemerality in literary expression. While the written text offers durability, repeatability, and the possibility of archival preservation, performance operates within the fleeting

immediacy of time, bodily presence, voice, and audience interaction. However, rather than presenting this relationship as a rigid opposition, Barber suggests that text and performance are mutually generative; performance animates the text, while the text stabilizes and extends the life of performance beyond its moment of utterance. This dynamic is particularly crucial to this study because Kagayi functions simultaneously as a page poet and a performance poet, producing work that circulates both in printed form and in live performance spaces. His poetry, therefore, occupies an interstitial space where written scripts inform performance, and performance in turn reshapes how the written text is interpreted. Through this lens, Kagayi's poetry is best understood not as a fixed literary product but as a living aesthetic practice, continually renegotiated through embodiment, audience engagement, and socio-political context. Barber's theorisation thus provides an essential framework for analysing how meaning in Kagayi's work is produced through the constant interplay between script and stage.

I build on, and extend Finnegan's "The Oral and Beyond", advancing the discussion about the literary value of African oral forms. She emphasizes these forms not merely as cultural artifacts but as dynamic, performative literary works. Finnegan notes that although some oral genres have received extensive documentation, their aesthetic and literary merits have often been overlooked, relegated to simplistic classifications like 'folklore' or 'oral tradition' instead of being regarded as significant literature (77). She argues that oral literature is fundamentally performative, realized through the interaction between a performer and an audience, with the nuances of live delivery playing a vital role in shaping meaning and impact (78–79). This performative aspect is particularly evident in sung poetry, where music is not just an accompaniment but a crucial component that enhances the verbal message (80). The oral artist's physical expression, through gestures, mimicry, and tonal variations, adds layers of meaning that resist transcription (80).

However, despite her compelling arguments, Finnegan's otherwise pioneering work tends to generalize oral performance within a traditional framework, leaving the radical, politically charged, and genre-blending aspects of contemporary African performance poetry insufficiently addressed. For example, Ugandan poet Kagayi uses oral poetics not solely as a cultural legacy but as a conscious form of political engagement, linguistic resistance, and social critique. While Finnegan correctly underscores the importance of performance, her analysis does not completely encompass how postcolonial African performance poetry reclaims and adapts oral traditions to address contemporary issues such as neocolonial language policies, governmental corruption, and collective memory. This is the crucial area this research explores: moving beyond mere archival respect to re-conceptualize orality as a living, confrontational, and evolving force, especially as seen in Kagayi's performed poetry in Uganda.

Mazisi Kunene's critique of Okpewho's framework for defining African epic literature reveals a larger epistemological tension in studying African oral traditions: the tendency to validate African forms using Eurocentric templates. Kunene argues that Okpewho's attempt to ground the African epic in the mold of European traditions obscures the distinctiveness of African literary expression, particularly its inextricable link to performance, music, and dance (Kunene 553–554). This concern is not merely about aesthetic differences but about how literature is lived and embodied within African contexts. In this view, performance is not an accessory to African oral poetry; it is constitutive of its meaning, authority, and communal function. What Kunene astutely observes, however, is still largely under-explored in contemporary scholarship on African poetry, especially concerning modern poet-performers whose work occupies the liminal space between tradition and modernity. Much of the existing literature has focused either on classical oral forms or written texts, often neglecting the dynamic interplay of voice, gesture, and presence in contemporary

performative poetry. This work on Kagayi addresses this lacuna by treating his poetry not merely as texts to be read but as living performances that reinvigorate oral traditions in urban, postcolonial Uganda. Kagayi's work resists the flattening gaze of print-centric analysis by foregrounding voice as protest, performance as pedagogy, and the poet as both griot and citizen. Thus, while Kunene rightly calls for a re-centering of African aesthetic principles in literary evaluation, I argue that examining contemporary performance poets like Kagayi allows us to see how these principles are being reimagined in politically urgent and artistically innovative ways.

Walter J. Ong's distinction between "primary orality" and "secondary orality" offers a useful framework for understanding the evolution of oral traditions in technologically mediated societies. He emphasizes that true primary oral cultures, those completely untouched by literacy, are now virtually extinct, and that contemporary forms of orality are inescapably shaped by print and electronic media (Ong 11). This insight has significant implications for how we read and position modern African performance poetry. However, Ong's argument, though illuminating, still privileges a Western discomfort with the ephemeral nature of oral expression, treating its "residueless" quality as a kind of conceptual challenge. What is often overlooked in such formulations is how African performance poets navigate, negotiate, and even harness this tension between orality and literacy to produce meaning that is deeply embodied, communal, and politically resonant. My research on Kagayi's performed poetry moves beyond the binaries of primary and secondary orality to foreground a third, context-specific mode: insurgent orality. This is a form of performance rooted in Uganda's postcolonial political landscape, in which the poet's voice does not simply vanish after the moment of delivery but reverberates through memory, shared experience, and collective action. Kagayi's performances, deliberately ephemeral yet intensely impactful, resist the assumption that permanence is the highest measure of literary worth. Instead,

they affirm the vitality of presence, the power of communal listening, and the subversive potential of performance as a site of memory-making and resistance. In this way, his work challenges us to reimagine oral literature not as a “monstrous concept,” but as a living, adaptive, and politically charged mode of literary production.

Robert Nixon’s analysis of oral literary scholarship exposes a critical flaw in early theoretical frameworks: the privileging of text over performance. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century folklorists often viewed oral artists not as creative agents but as passive vessels of collective memory, stripping performance of its artistry and immediacy (Nixon 54). Even as later scholars attempted more empirical approaches, they frequently reproduced this limitation by isolating the “text” from its living performance context, neglecting key elements such as audience dynamics, social setting, and performer intentionality. This reductionist tendency has had lasting consequences on how African oral literature has been theorized, with performance often relegated to an anecdotal or decorative function rather than being recognized as central to meaning-making. My study on Kagayi’s poetry disrupts this textual bias by emphasizing the co-creation that occurs between poet and audience in live performance spaces. Kagayi does not merely recite poems; he stages public interventions, engaging bodies, voices, and collective emotion to provoke reflection and mobilize social consciousness. His work cannot be understood solely through the printed page since it breathes in the charged spaces of schools, theatres, and protests where the boundaries between art and activism dissolve. In foregrounding the context-specific, performative dimensions of Kagayi’s poetry, my study restores agency to the performer and asserts the urgency of audience reception as an interpretive site. In doing so, it contributes to a necessary shift in African literary studies, one that resists archival fixation and embraces the lived, contested, and performative nature of poetic expression in postcolonial Uganda.

Enongene Mirabeau Sone underscores the long-standing marginalization of oral literature within literary studies, noting that it was historically relegated to the peripheries of disciplines like anthropology, history, and religious studies rather than being regarded as literature in its own right (Sone 2). This disciplinary prejudice not only devalued the literary merit of oral expression but also distorted its purpose and poetics by stripping it from the context of performance and artistic intent. Thanks to the foundational contributions of scholars like Ruth Finnegan, Okpewho, and Nketia, oral literature has begun to claim its rightful place as a legitimate and complex literary field. However, despite this progress, much of the scholarship still privileges classical, rural-based oral forms, leaving contemporary urban performance poets underexplored. My work on Kagayi responds to this lingering gap by asserting that performance poetry in modern Uganda is not merely a continuation of tradition but a dynamic literary practice in its own right, rooted in lived socio-political realities and driven by artistic consciousness. Kagayi's work, steeped in the cadences of spoken word and the rituals of live performance, demands to be studied as literature, crafted, intentional, and subversive. It challenges the still-lingering notion that only print-based, "fixed" texts can be analyzed through the lens of literary theory. By centering Kagayi's performances, my study both affirms oral poetry as a legitimate field of literary inquiry and expands its terrain to include the politically charged, creatively rich voices of contemporary African cities.

Isidore Okpewho astutely frames the study of African oral literature as an essential dimension of cultural self-discovery and vindication, a scholarly and artistic reclamation of African identity from centuries of misrepresentation and epistemic domination (Okpewho 36–37). He rightly aligns this intellectual effort with Pan-African cultural expressions such as FESTAC, noting that even in their imperfections, such celebrations affirm a collective yearning to reassert the richness of African expressive traditions. Yet, while Okpewho highlights the symbolic power of these

gestures, the lived urgency of cultural reclamation often finds a more visceral, grounded expression in the work of contemporary African performance poets. My work on Kagayi contributes to this evolving discourse by illuminating how his performance poetry functions not just as a celebration of African orality but as an instrument of self-definition in Uganda's fraught political and cultural landscape. Kagayi's poetry interrogates colonial legacies, challenges linguistic repression, and dramatizes the everyday struggles of Ugandans to assert their identities in a postcolonial society that still bears colonial scars. Unlike the festival model, which risks spectacle, Kagayi's performances are intimate and confrontational, rooted in community and driven by purpose. His work is not merely an artistic echo of tradition but a living archive of resistance and remembrance, insisting that the study of African oral literature must evolve beyond celebration to include critical, politically engaged, and context-sensitive analysis.

Bauman and Briggs call for a radical reorientation in the study of oral performance, arguing that performers and audiences must be treated not merely as sources of data but as intellectual partners capable of contributing meaningfully to cultural theory (Bauman and Briggs 61). This performance-based approach resists the detached, extractive tendencies of earlier ethnographic models, instead demanding that scholars account for how social variables, such as gender, class, and historical context, inform both the creation and interpretation of oral discourse. Crucially, they critique the way "native models" are often constructed by scholars who prioritize elicited content over lived communicative practices. The study on Kagayi takes this call seriously by positioning him not simply as a performer of political poetry but as a public intellectual whose work theorizes Ugandan society through rhythm, metaphor, and embodied presence. Kagayi's performances are not just cultural artifacts to be analyzed; they are themselves sites of theorization, reflections on language, power, and nationhood delivered in poetic form. His spoken word engages the audience

not just emotionally but intellectually, transforming communal spaces into platforms of political consciousness and cultural critique. In treating Kagayi as a co-theorist rather than a cultural informant, my study challenges lingering colonial hierarchies in literary scholarship and affirms the capacity of African performance poets to produce knowledge from within their own oral traditions.

Ngũgĩ offers a powerful spatial conception of performance, insisting that the performance arena is never neutral. It is saturated with historical memory and charged with the potential to imagine alternative futures (“Enactments” 41). Far from being an inert backdrop, the performance space becomes a battleground where dominant ideologies are challenged and collective consciousness is negotiated. This framing is particularly instructive in the Ugandan context, where state surveillance, colonial hangovers, and cultural repression shape who gets to speak, where, and how. Kagayi’s performances embody this struggle over space. He often reclaims educational institutions, public halls, and community spaces as living stages where suppressed histories are resurrected and the possibility of a liberated future is invoked. His refusal to separate poetry from politics, and indeed from place, exposes the layered meanings embedded in each performance venue. Kagayi’s awareness of space as historically and socially inscribed reflects Ngũgĩ’s notion that every site of performance holds both memory and longing. Thus, his poetry does not merely occur in space; it activates it, turning bare platforms into charged sites of communal reflection and resistance. My study contends that understanding this spatial politics is crucial to appreciating the radical work that performance poets like Kagayi undertake in transforming both minds and geographies.

Fiona Siegenthaler draws attention to the ability of performance art to make the invisible visible, illuminating not just social realities but also deeply embedded emotional and psychic imaginaries

(Siegenthaler 166). This interpretive space, where visible form intersects with invisible feeling, is particularly fertile in performance poetry, where the body, voice, and text converge to express what often eludes rational discourse. In the case of Kagayi, performance becomes a vehicle for excavating unspoken grief, generational frustration, and postcolonial yearning. His spoken word operates in that liminal zone Siegenthaler describes, but with a political urgency unique to Uganda's contemporary topography. Kagayi's stage becomes a site where suppressed anxieties about education, identity, and governance are not only articulated but also embodied. He transforms metaphors into gestures, anger into cadence, and hope into collective chorus, making otherwise abstract socio-political concerns tangible for his audiences. While scholars have explored performance's power to unveil invisibilized structures of feeling, few have centered East African poets like Kagayi, who blend this artistic strategy with decolonial critique. My research, therefore, asserts the importance of treating such poets as theorists of the unseen, mapping not only the discursive structures of their nations but also the affective terrains that shape postcolonial subjectivity.

Ari Sitas rightly notes that oral performance survives and even regenerates itself in contemporary public life, not because of nostalgic romanticism but because of material conditions that still privilege orality over literacy in many communities (94–95). This insight is crucial, particularly in African societies where lived experience, access to education, and the immediacy of socio-political crises make oral performance a dynamic mode of communication. Yet, much of the existing literature still under-theorizes the political and imaginative power of performance poetry in contemporary Africa. Scholars like Walter Ong (11) and Ruth Finnegan have laid the groundwork by defining orality and challenging Western literary hierarchies, while Mazisi Kunene (553–554) and Robert Nixon (54) have emphasized performance as integral, not incidental, to African literary

expression. Bauman and Briggs further urge us to see performers not as passive data sources but as theorists in their own right (61). Still, the bulk of this scholarship often circles around generalized notions of “the performer,” rarely zooming into specific figures like Kagayi, whose work insists that the performance stage is not just a space for aesthetic display but for radical pedagogy, historical reckoning, and decolonial imagination. In my study, I argue that Kagayi’s poetry offers more than resistance; it functions as a lived epistemology, rooted in oral tradition yet acutely aware of Uganda’s postcolonial contradictions. His art is not just a reaction to systemic failures but a method of social analysis, emotional reckoning, and cultural restoration. What is missing, then, is a thorough exploration of how such poets use performance not merely to communicate but to theorize, not merely to reflect society but to reimagine it.

Richard Bauman’s performance-centered scholarship has laid a foundational framework for understanding performance as a communicative and culturally embedded act. In *Story, Performance, and Event*, Bauman foregrounds the role of performance as an emergent and situated event, where meaning is co-constructed between performer and audience (Bauman 4–5). His focus on oral narrative forms, such as storytelling, highlights the significance of context, reflexivity, and verbal artistry in shaping performance. Similarly, in *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, Bauman expands this perspective by exploring performance as a cultural resource, a medium through which societies reflect, critique, and transmit their values (Bauman, xiv). He emphasizes performance as a “social form about society,” calling attention to its potential for both cultural continuity and transformation.

While Bauman’s work has deeply informed the study of oral literature, folklore, and ethnopoetic forms, there remains a notable gap in applying these theories to contemporary African spoken

word poetry, especially within urban postcolonial settings. Bauman's texts primarily examine performance in folkloric or ethnographic contexts, often focusing on community-based or rural traditions. This creates a theoretical space yet to be fully explored, one where modern performance poets like Kagayi mobilize traditional oral aesthetics alongside contemporary political consciousness in urban, post-independence African societies. Scholars have yet to fully investigate how performance theory applies to poets whose works are overtly activist, nationally visible, and intentionally disruptive, as in the case of Kagayi.

This study responds directly to that gap by extending Bauman's performance framework into the domain of Ugandan spoken word poetry, examining how Kagayi's performances operate as socially engaged, performatively rich texts. While Bauman discusses performance broadly as a communicative process, this research brings his theory into direct dialogue with postcolonial political critique, decolonial aesthetics, and the contemporary Ugandan performance scene. By doing so, it not only expands the application of performance theory but also foregrounds African spoken word as a serious literary and cultural practice worthy of scholarly attention.

Rare performances like Allen Ginsberg's, where audience participation verges on a "mass chorus" and the poem incites communal catharsis, underscore the visceral power of live poetic delivery. As Peter Middleton observes, such performances evoke a kind of "mental disrobing" where audience and performer dissolve into a shared emotional and intellectual experience (Middleton 216). Yet, as evocative as these moments are in Western literary memory, they remain underexplored in African contexts where such communal energy is not the exception but a cultural foundation. While influential scholars like Ong (11), Kunene (553–554), and Finnegan have offered theoretical frameworks for understanding orality, they often fall short of capturing the

complex, performative vitality of contemporary African poetic expression. Even when performance is acknowledged, it is frequently filtered through comparative or textualist lenses that obscure the radical immediacy and sociopolitical charge of the event itself. What remains under-theorized is how poets like Kagayi retool oral traditions not simply to preserve cultural memory, but to actively engage with postcolonial trauma, systemic injustice, and the unfinished project of decolonization. His work exemplifies what Ngũgĩ terms the “psychic forces” embedded in performance spaces (41), as well as what Bauman and Briggs advocate for: a reorientation that sees performers and audiences not as passive carriers of data, but as “intellectual partners” in meaning-making (61). Kagayi’s poetry transforms the performative space into a theatre of urgency, one where language is not only heard but felt, contested, and reclaimed. This study, therefore, addresses a critical lacuna in current literature: the need to understand African performance poetry not merely as an extension of oral tradition, but as a living, embodied form of resistance and re-imagination.

Harold Scheub investigates the use of imagery in oral poetry, highlighting the challenges of separating imagery from this genre (Scheub 483-484). He asserts that the oral historian, much like the oral poet, depends on the complex interplay with images to narrate the social and historical lives of their people (494). Comprehending the significance of imagery within oral poetry performance is vital to this study, as it provides insight into Kagayi as a performance poet, who strongly utilizes imagery to convey his message of change. Scheub concentrates solely on the performances of South African bards, confining his analysis to South African performance poetry. By examining Kagayi’s poetry through the lens of Scheub’s study of oral poetry and imagery, this research broadens his work by analyzing the role of imagery in the performed poetry of a Ugandan performance poet. Duncan Brown argues that several twentieth-century poets create poetry that

blends both “orality and literacy” in their work (Brown 21). Therefore, it is important to highlight that this study examines Kagayi’s works and the intersection between oral and written practices.

Weighing in on the poetry and performance debate, Leonard Obina Onwuegbuche stresses the complexity in performance, not only because of props and costumes, or the employment of eye contact, gestures, and several other things that make up a performance, but also the nature of the poet’s performance. The way this poet performs will determine whether he is preferred over another performer or not, even when the performance tells the same story (Onwuegbuche 26-27). A performer is therefore given credit or otherwise for the way he uses the elements of performance to perform.

While discussing *Orality in Recent West African Poetry*, Tanure Ojaide explains how the modern African poets still perform the roles that were assigned to them in traditional Africa. The poets maintain their power of prophecy, priesthood, and social reformation because their performances are determined by traditional African literature, which they use for the expression of cultural identity (Ojaide 304). In this study, Ojaide explores orality in West African poetry by its impact, extent, and nature. Not only does Ojaide place his focus on West African poetry, but his study focuses on the West African poets up until 1996 when his study was published. My study interrogates the recent practice of poetry in East Africa, with a particular focus on Kagayi.

In sum, while existing scholarship by Finnegan, Barber, Scheub, Brown, Onwuegbuche, and Ojaide offers a rich background to the study of oral poetry and performance across African contexts, much of it either remains general or regionally focused outside of Uganda. These scholars provide foundational insights into the distinctions between orality and literacy, the fluid nature of text and performance, and the performative tools poets use to engage audiences. However, there

remains a scholarly gap in critically analyzing how a contemporary Ugandan poet like Kagayi deliberately occupies both the stage and the page to construct a politically charged, culturally rooted, and socially transformative poetic voice. This study builds on these foundations to examine how Kagayi's poetry, as both text and performance, enacts a decolonial and activist agenda, engages audiences across class and language barriers, and revitalizes the role of the poet in Uganda's contemporary sociopolitical space. By grounding the analysis in Ugandan realities and focusing on a living, practicing poet, this research contributes new, context-specific insights into the dynamic relationship between performance and literary production in East Africa today.

2.2. African Poetry and the Socio-Political Space

This section provides an overview of the literature concerning Africa, East Africa, and Uganda, highlighting key trends, challenges, and developments within these regions. It contextualizes the current research and positions Kagayi as a performance poet as well as a writer.

Scholars like Israel Muvindi discuss written African Poetry and why it started. Muvindi argues that the main idea surrounding African poetry is the fight and scuffle against the lack of fairness of justice, with much focus on the period of colonialism that was characterized by oppression, exploitation, and discrimination against Africans, driving them to fight back with poetry (Muvindi 508). Muvindi creates a link between African poetry and the colonial period, identifying Negritude, Protest, Struggle, Disillusionment, and Love as the kinds of poetry that the Africans wrote in protest against the colonialists. It is true that Africans still write fighting injustice; however, they no longer write directly against the colonial powers. African poets also write to fight against the African political leaders who have been influenced by colonialism. It is therefore important that this study recognizes Muvindi's argument, but also shows how African poetry has

progressed through the years from fighting the colonial powers to fighting the political, social, and cultural spheres beyond the colonial period.

In the discussion of African poetry, which was largely shaped by the 'devastating effects of slavery and colonization,' Adetuyi and Adeniran examine three key periods in the history of African poetry: pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial poetry. However, their analysis overlooks critical discussions about how African writers continue to engage with the colonial legacy. It also neglects the ongoing impact of colonialism on Africa's social, political, cultural, and economic landscapes, including the persistence of oppression and exploitation, not only by colonial powers but also by Africans themselves. This oversight highlights a gap in the discussion of East African poetry.

Ulli Beier allocates a section for the critical analysis of African poetry in *Introduction to African Literature*, where scholars critically review the poetry of Africa. In this section, Abiola Irele discusses the poetry of Aimé Césaire, a poet of "the Negro Revolt". He notes that his poetry attacks the Western world directly as it exposes them as the oppressors of the black race (Irele 71). In addition, Beier reflects on the poetry of Rabearivelo, whose poetry has no concern with African personality or colonialism and who only writes around the themes of "death, dissolution, catastrophe, and sometimes resurrection". His poetry is built on a world of "death and frustration" (Beier 99-101). Beier also discusses the poetry of L.S. Senghor, whose *négritude* was strongly asserted, and his poetry revolved around death. Senghor usually referred to the ancestors (the dead), calling them to help, protect, and guide their people (Beier 105-109). These early critical studies on African poetry are important in understanding why resistance and change are common themes in the writing of African poets. Most of this poetry is founded on the ideas of resistance, and it therefore sheds more light on the continued African writings on change and resistance.

Drawing upon the foundational context of African and East African literature, David Cook examines *The Craft of Poetry*. He initiates his argument by highlighting the distinct nature of poetry in comparison to the novel. Traditional African communities recognized poetry as a widely appreciated and engaging form of art within literature. However, in educational settings, many students expressed apprehension toward studying poetry, largely because the teachers themselves were reluctant to teach it, looking at it as a “tedious and fearsome obstacle-course” (Cook 35). Poetry in East Africa, according to Cook, was inadequate both in form and approach, and this poetry generally lacked “the blaze of vision, the passion of strongly felt experience, the sequential development of ideas in terms of images and verbal designs” (Cook 52). Cook discusses what he views as the lack of poetry in English and the lack of vision and strong expression of personal experience in the poetry of East Africa by the time he published this critical view on African literature in 1977. This provides my study with a history of East African poetry at the time Cook presented this argument.

Adrian Roscoe elucidates the development of verse in East African poetry, pointing out that writing in English started much later in East Africa than it did in West Africa, and there was a need to rid East Africa of “literary barrenness” (Roscoe 31). Roscoe highlights the abrupt emergence of poetry and literary writing in East Africa and considers whether the credit should be attributed to Taban Lo Liyong, who devoted time in his Howard University apartment contemplating solutions to the dearth of literary writing in East Africa, or to the Conference of African Writers in 1962, at Makerere. He mentions several poets that joined Ngũgĩ and himself in East African writing, including Okot p’Bitek, Richard Nturu, John Mbiti, Jared Angira, Amin Kassam, Edwin Waiyaki, Charles Mangua, Godwin Wachira, Meja Mwangi, Okello Oculi, Sam Mbure, Robert Serumaga,

among others (Roscoe 31). Roscoe's review of *East African Literature*, enlightening as it is, focuses on the first generation of post-independence East African writers.

The discussion around the lack of literature by David Cook and Adrian Roscoe continues in K. L. Goodwin's *Understanding African Poetry*. His focus, however, like Roscoe's, is on the sudden rise of poets in East Africa after Taban Lo Liyong's 1965 description of East African poetry. He pays critical attention to the work of Okot p'Bitek, whose preference for writing in his language, rather than English, was highly respected (Goodwin 154). Goodwin is an early commentator whose work must be supplemented by contemporary African and East African critics; however, his ideas, in part, guide my discussion by giving an understanding of African and East African poetry by analyzing the song school of Okot p'Bitek. My study, therefore, involves a prolonged discussion aimed at participating in the understanding of African poetry. Goodwin also reflects on how African poetry emanated from their colonizers and how this poetry was a reflection of a commensurable acceptance of the values of the white man (Goodwin v). This is also an important aspect to look out for while discussing contemporary Ugandan poetry.

Like Goodwin, Kwadwo Osei-Nyame found that African poetry was a hybrid with a blend of both European and African themes. He contends that it is difficult to outline the ideas and style that have led to the development of African poetry, but singles out the Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo, as one poet who makes African concerns more identifiable (Osei-Nyame 250). Osei-Nyame focuses on understanding themes in African poetry and how most of the themes have been affected by hybridity. Osei-Nyame's discussion of African poetry and the blend between European and African concerns is made clear when Christopher Kirunda discusses the hybrid nature of African poetry, more specifically in Christopher Okigbo's poetry. He describes the nature of the poetry of Christopher Okigbo, and other first-generation African writers as resourceful because of

the blend of cultures that influenced their poetry (Kirunda 3). Both Kirunda and Osei-Nyame provide clear details of the nature of the poetry of the first generation of African writers, which gives my study a strong foundation, placing Kagayi in a different generation of African writers and attempting to find out how this cultural hybridity that affected the first generation of African writers has affected the spoken word generation that this study places Kagayi under.

It is also worth noting that Oyeniyi Okunoye points out this blend of cultures as central to the criticism of modern African poetry. He suggests that there is a risk of taking on pre-existing ideas without questioning their appropriateness for the cultural context being examined. There is a tendency to take frameworks that were created in the Western cultural environment and apply them to African literature, which can lead to a misunderstanding of the cultural and literary nuances that are unique to the African literary environment (Okunoye 784).

Ojaide also lays a foundational framework for the study of African poetry by identifying specific characteristics that distinguish it from other poetic traditions. He contends that African literature strongly reflects African traditional cultures, even when it is written in non-African languages such as English, French, and Portuguese. Central to this tradition is the view of the poet as a social figure whose role extends beyond aesthetic expression. Ojaide draws a parallel between the African poet and the prophet, arguing that both are marked by qualities of prophecy, foresight, and insight, which position the poet as a moral and cultural guide within society (Ojaide 135).

In addition, Ojaide identifies African poetry as being communal in orientation, didactic in purpose, and closely connected to oral traditions, including song, performance, and audience engagement. He notes that African poets often assume the responsibility of speaking truth to power, critiquing social injustice, political failure, and moral decay while remaining rooted in indigenous

worldviews. These characteristics: prophetic vision, social responsibility, communal consciousness, and oral-performative aesthetics, are particularly significant for this study as they provide a critical lens through which Kagayi Ngobi's poetry can be understood as both a cultural practice and a form of socio-political intervention.

Bartholomew Chizoba Akpah raises an argument that many African writers have been attracted to writing within the socio-political space because of the emergence of class divisions, with the upper class claiming top spot in the hierarchy (104), giving examples of literary works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *A Man of the People*, Ngũgĩ's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* as works that carefully delve into politics and corruption. The havoc created by poor governance undoubtedly pulls the attention of the literary writer and gives them a great deal to talk about, as this was the original place of a writer, to act as a seer. Chizoba Akpah focuses on West Africa and discusses experiences where poets like Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Femi Fatoba, Funso Aiyejina, AfamAkeh, Remi Raji, Nelson Fashina, among others, draw their poetry from experiences of torture and suffering that were imposed by the political leaders (Akpah 106).

The political space draws so much attention to writers, and it has led to torture and imprisonment for several writers. While analyzing the poetry of, and the comments from Stella Nyanzi's poetry, Blossom Shimayam Ottoh-Agede demonstrates that poetry exposes a situation that requires a dire need for socio-cultural and political change (Ottoh-Agede 33). Ottoh-Agede's analysis confirms the constant struggle for change through Stella Nyanzi's poetry, however, this study does not take into consideration other poetic approaches and devices that can be used to advocate for change. This study argues that Kagayi will stand as an example of a more diverse yet strong approach to writing for socio-cultural and political change.

Daniel Olowookere, in his discussion of *The Nature of Modern African Poetry*, argues that there cannot be a separation between oral poetry and modern poetry, despite the growth and development of poetry in Africa into a more modern kind of poetry, with many modern poets adapting oral literary techniques into the form of writing (Olowookere 161).

When defining Ugandan Literature, it is not possible to leave out the issue of what concerns the country. Austin Bukenya defines Ugandan Literature as “literature written in Uganda by Ugandans, in any of the languages used in Uganda, and about Ugandan topics and with genuinely Ugandan concerns” (Bukenya x).

This definition is considered by Danson Kahyana as good enough, except when Bukenya mentions that the work must be written in Uganda to be considered Ugandan literature. Kahyana argues, “For me, as long as a text engages Ugandan concerns and themes, it qualifies as Ugandan literature even if it was written outside the country...” (Kahyana 2)

This debate, like the debate on the definition of African Literature, is complex, although I agree with Kahyana because even poetry that is written by one who is not Ugandan, but about Ugandan issues, can cover themes concerning Uganda.

In Goretti Kyomuhendo’s conversation with Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, the author of *Kintu*, Makumbi’s response to the question of her audience is very insightful for this study. Her acknowledgment of Uganda as the central audience of her novel and how it affected the language, attitude, and tone (Kyomuhendo 40-41) is crucial to understanding Kagayi in context.

A discussion of the ways of writing of both the colonial and postcolonial Ugandan writers can be revealing, especially looking at the issues discussed by Uganda’s Okot p’Bitek, who lived through colonialism and post-independence. Chris Wanjala discusses the subject of Okot p’Bitek’s poetry

and how Okot presented East Africa through his song school (Wanjala 128). What Wanjala does not show, because of the period in which he wrote, is that the same issues Okot p'Bitek voices through his song school are quite similar to those voiced by the current generation of Ugandan poets like Kagayi, and it is these same issues that fuel a dire need for socio-cultural and political change in the country.

In “Ugandan Poetry: Trends and Features (1965-95)”, Ernesto Okello Ogwang provides a comprehensive background of Ugandan poetry. He discourages the tendency to view the post-colonial Ugandan society as simply a result of the colonial legacy (Ogwang 101). He further suggests that while it might be true that Uganda experienced a decline due to political mismanagement after gaining independence, the explanation for this decline often relies on a repetitive and overused narrative that frames Uganda’s past as once glorious, before a steady decline caused by mismanagement in the post-independence era (101). Ogwang’s study captures a deeper, more nuanced historical reality of Ugandan society in his discussion of Ugandan poetry. He states, “For to give an account of the development of Ugandan poetry by arguing consistently along the lines cited above, borders on making politically correct explanations at the expense of a more critical analysis of the development and the state of the poetic tradition.” (Ogwang 101)

From this perspective, one finds that it is important to think of the poetic process before rushing to the conclusion of a politically driven poem. Ogwang’s study gives a strong background to Kagayi’s poetry, especially because it discusses poetry in Uganda in the 1960s and 1990s, referring to foundational Ugandan poets like Okot p'Bitek, Timothy Wangusa, Jagdit Singh, and Richard Ntiru.

While still focusing on Ugandan poetry and the general concern of two generations of Ugandan poets, Susan Kiguli pays close attention, not only to the major concerns of the “older Ugandan

poets” and the “contemporary Ugandan poets”, but also to the socio-political environment of Uganda and the influence it has on the poet. She makes it clear that the poetic tradition in Uganda extends back to the time before colonization and that Ugandan poetry is founded on oral poetry from the different Ugandan tribes (Kiguli 118). Kiguli captures two generations of poets with Okot p’Bitek, Timothy Wangusa, David Rubadiri, Henry Barlow, Austin Bukenya, and Richard Nturu as the “older Ugandan poets” and Jane Okot p’Bitek, Susan Kiguli, Frank Anywar Ojera, and Okot Benge as “contemporary Ugandan poets”. This builds on Ogwang’s background, as well as the background to this study, because by examining the works of these generations of poets, Kiguli sets a foundation for a discussion of another generation of poets, where Kagayi’s poetry figures prominently and will lead to a discussion of other spoken word poets of this time. In her conclusion, Kiguli notes, “The Ugandan poet writes on numerous topics, but some topics are discussed at length and with care. Those topics, such as bad rulers, injustice, war, and corruption, seem to be at the core of their concerns.” (Kiguli 130).

The topics mentioned are still core of the concern of Ugandan poets, and African writers in general. My study focuses on introducing a new generation of poets, whom I refer to in general terms as the spoken word generation. Against the backdrop of this study, these poets address similar issues of corrupt leadership, injustice, war, and corruption with an intense desire for change.

There is an increasing debate around the reading culture of Ugandans, especially when it comes to poetry. Ugandans have been diagnosed with a ‘phobia’ for poetry that seemed to get a bit of treatment from Susan Kiguli’s 81 poems in *The African Saga* (Kahyana 503). This suggests that there is a general lack of interest or appreciation for poetry in Uganda, but Kiguli’s poetry might have contributed to reviving interest in the genre and helping to overcome the perceived "phobia" that Ugandans have for poetry. This builds on the assumption that poetry captures the most

important subjects of politics and society. Because poetry attracts a good reading culture for Ugandans, more of this work must be looked at besides the 81 poems in Susan Kiguli's *The African Saga*.

Understanding the background to Ugandan literature enriches this research because one gets the perception and perspective that what makes literature Ugandan lies within the setting, the writer, cultural experience, and language, among others, and generally getting the understanding that African literature in general, and Ugandan literature in particular, draws from oral tradition.

2.3. Poetry and Change

Several debates have come up about the power of poets and their poetry, with the common word that dominates being "change". Poetry, through its versatile nature, possesses the capacity to infiltrate political, social, economic, cultural, and religious domains, thereby playing a key role in discussing change within these domains. P. M.S. Dawson relates poetry to political events through language. He points out that like anyone else, poets are greatly involved and affected by political events and controversies (Dawson 56). Since political ideas and discussions are expressed through language, Dawson contends that poets could have a more direct connection to these political controversies since they work with language. This discussion is pertinent to the current study, given that its main objective is to explore the representation of socio-cultural and political issues, which catalyze the discussion of change. While Dawson's study offers valuable insights, it overlooks certain populations, particularly by not engaging with African poets. This study fills that gap by exploring Dawson's analysis of poetry and societal change based on the work of an African performance poet.

Poetry is regarded as a powerful tool for social change. In their discussion of poetry and society, Manresa and Glăveanu remark that it is impossible to achieve change in society without expressing the need for it creatively, which requires “improvisation, imagination and collaboration”. They argue that there are no other steps that are established for change besides creative writing or expression (Manresa and Glăveanu 58). This further speaks to poetry as an essential tool for change and guides this study to appreciate the poetic process and outcome of Kagayi’s poetry. Manresa and Glăveanu call for a return to *poesis*, to appreciate the powerful potential that poetry has within society (58) and they exemplify this by discussing a poetic movement, #YoSoy132 in terms of oral poetry and a generation of new ideas built on the old generations (58-59). My study broadens this perspective by applying Manresa and Glăveanu’s ideas on poetry and social transformation to the context of a Ugandan performance poet.

Benjamin Anabaraonye et.al. discuss poetry concerning climate change and its power and extend the argument that poetry functions as a transformative tool, with a particular focus on its relationship to climate change (Anabaraonye et.al. 82). The exploration of poetry concerning climate change is particularly insightful, as it prompts a deeper examination of poetry’s role in addressing global issues, with climate change being one such example. However, it prompts a critical question: What is poetry’s approach to fostering change in other issues, apart from climate?

Change is a central theme for poetry, and Octavio Paz elaborates this further during a lecture at the University of Utah. In his lecture, Paz distinguishes between two different kinds of poets by their concerns. The first group of poets he refers to as modern poets concerned themselves with locating the principles of change, and they often looked at change as the central theme of their creative works. The second group, the emerging poets, focus on a deeper understanding of more basic truths that drive change itself, rather than focusing on change in an immediate sense (Paz

76). This lecture offers a strong background to the ideas of the relationship between poetry and change, and places change at the center of poetry for both modern poets and those emerging, which is helpful to this study because it discusses change as a foundation of poetic expression.

Paz focuses more on his discussion of poetry and change in terms of background, which leaves the “how” question unanswered. By focusing on the poetry of Kagayi, this research uses Paz’s lecture as a stepping stone to show how change (socio-cultural and political) is represented through poetry.

David Aberbach elaborates on how poetry can result in change. This is basically through revelation. He explains that national poetry is not simply a reflection of stability in terms of national identity, but, to a great extent, a reflection of a nation’s weak identity through the expression of “humiliation, grievance, and rage at an imperial or colonial oppressor” (Aberbach 261-262). Through language, poetry presents a reality that its audience has been refusing to see, and once this reality has been presented, it brings about shame and disappointment in this society, which is an inspiration to change. Aberbach’s assertion is important to my study because he explains the process of change through poetry. His description of poetry as an expression of the different societal issues taking place, leading to humiliation, and then change helps in the discussion of Kagayi’s poetry. Although Aberbach offers an insightful and comprehensive analysis of the poetic process that facilitates social change, his study remains broad, incorporating examples from diverse global contexts. He primarily references David Diop from Africa to illustrate the theme of poetry reflecting oppression that leads to violent upheaval. By focusing on the poetry of Kagayi, this study adds value to Aberbach’s work, providing a more detailed study of poetry leading to change within the specific context of Uganda.

Michael Edwards also discusses poetry concerning change through making one aware of the world around them. He suggests that poetry starts with the desire to connect with the world and everything within it and the poet attempts to achieve this through language. As the poem connects with reality, the readers/audience are made aware of what is taking place in their world (Edwards 10). Edwards reflects on how poetry grapples with the silence of the world and how this silence influences the meaning and purpose of poetic expression. His study exemplifies the connection between Kagayi's poetry and Ugandan society, through language and style that makes his audience aware of the challenges being faced with the hope for change. My study extends Edward's discussion by focusing on the poetry of Kagayi, offering a more specific and thorough analysis of poetry's role in driving change in Uganda.

Neil L. Jamieson strongly contends that poetry has great potential to challenge notions of power, moral responsibility, and societal structures which, in the past were not questionable and in doing so, it provokes change (Jamieson 344). Jamieson's study focuses on Vietnam throughout his discussion of poetry and the process of social change, which limits the discussion to only one area.

While discussing the poetry of Ezenwa-Ohaeto of Nigeria, concerning change, Ifejirika Echezona states, "In fact, Ezenwa-Ohaeto never spared any group of people in Nigeria in his subtle satirical criticism that calls for a change of heart, style, attitude and practice in order to produce a better society." (Echezona 168)

Echezona critically explains the poetry of the Nigerian poet, Ezenwa-Ohaeto, and how his poetry speaks to and calls for change. He discusses that in his poetry, no group was doing the right thing, and this is why his poetry had something to expose and ridicule all the groups in Nigeria. This study is therefore enriching because it opens up a discussion on different poets and how their

poetry speaks to change. Echezona, however, not only focuses on a Nigerian poet, but he also examines the written works of the poet. My study focuses on a Ugandan performance poet and, therefore, critically studies how poetry calls for change through satirical criticism in both the written and performed poetry of Kagayi.

Russel A. Brooks builds two dimensions of change while discussing Afro-American poetry. The first dimension of change describes a turn from what used to be to what is now (Brooks 9). The first generation of post-colonial poets, for example, while writing for change, express poetically how society was before the colonial experience, to how it was during colonialism. Poets like Okot p'Bitek have critically expressed this change in their poetry, thus fitting well into Brooks' first dimension. The second dimension of change describes what is going on in society and what shall happen, what ought or must be (9). Brooks' study on change makes it easy to place Kagayi under the second dimension of poets' writing for change, which enriches this study. His study, however, focuses on the Afro-American poets. My analysis focuses on the works of Kagayi, guided by Brooks' two dimensions of change to give his work another perspective.

2.4. Chapter Summary

The existing scholarship shows that there is an expansive landscape that surrounds the socio-cultural and political space in the country. Yet, there remains a significant gap in the academic exploration of performance poetry, particularly about Kagayi.

The first section explores the enduring presence of orality in African literary traditions. It examines scholarly reflections on oral poetry as a performative and communal art form that challenges the hegemony of written texts. The section also considers the work of theorists who have emphasized performance as a mode of cultural expression and historical continuity.

The second section interrogates the intersection between poetic expression and political discourse on the continent. It reviews critical perspectives on how African poets have responded to colonialism, post-independence disillusionment, and contemporary socio-political realities through verse. Special attention is given to how poetry becomes a site of resistance, memory, and ideological confrontation.

The third section engages with literature that conceptualizes poetry as an instrument of transformation. This part draws on scholarship that links poetic practice to activism, education, and collective consciousness, examining how poets use their art to inspire, mobilize, and reimagine society.

It is clear that previous works have discussed widely the different thematic concerns of African and Ugandan poetry; however, the different ways in which Kagayi uses performance as a tool for socio-cultural and political change need critical discussion. Together, these three subsections illuminate the theoretical foundations and scholarly debates that frame this study's analysis of Kagayi's poetry. They also help to clarify how the current research seeks to bridge existing gaps by engaging performance as both method and message in the poetic quest for socio-political change.

CHAPTER THREE

KAGAYI'S PERFORMED POETRY AS PERFORMATIVE TEXT AND LIVING ART

Poetry is something that you recognize as a way of using language well, and it crops up everywhere that people use language. I'm not saying that everybody wants to go and write it down, right? But poetry is not about whether it is written down, or whether it's on stage. It's about a particular way of using language.

– Jean Breeze (Interview: A Round Table Discussion on Poetry in Performance, 1999)

3.0. Introduction

This chapter investigates Kagayi's performed poetry as a performative text and living art, intending to understand how his work serves as a dynamic mode of socio-cultural and political expression. Through a close analysis of selected performances, the chapter examines how the poet's work embodies the aesthetics of orality, dramatization, and audience engagement, creating meaning that is both heard and experienced.

Drawing from the theory of performance, this chapter approaches Kagayi's poetry as a multidimensional art form that blurs the boundaries between poetry, theatre, and activism. The term "performative text" is employed in this chapter to explore how Kagayi's spoken word interrogates voice, gesture, and rhythm to shape the poetic message. The concept of "living art" is also used to highlight the temporality, embodiment, and communal essence of his performances, particularly in the Ugandan context, where oral traditions have long served as vehicles of storytelling, memory, and resistance.

This chapter argues that Kagayi's performance poetry functions as living art, a dynamic, embodied practice through which political critique, collective memory, and social resistance are continuously enacted rather than merely represented. By examining selected performed poems, the chapter addresses the first research objective by analysing how performance transforms poetic text into a

socially situated and participatory event. In this study, the term *performative* refers to the enacted techniques of voice, gesture, posture, and audience interaction, while *living art* designates the poem's capacity to exist as an ongoing, evolving cultural act beyond the written page.

3.1. Understanding the Poem as a Performative Text

The concept of the poem as a performative text requires one to think of poetry not only as a written literary form but also as a mode of embodied communication. If it is written down before being performed, poetry remains in static form, and it is performance that transforms this written poetry into living art, shaped by the performer's voice, movement, setting, and interaction with the audience. Kagayi's spoken word poetry thrives in the moment of its delivery, where meaning is not merely relayed but enacted, felt, and negotiated in real time. Thus, for a poet like Kagayi, performance is not merely a supplement to the poem, but arguably the most essential aspect employed through most of his poetry.

In an asynchronous interview conducted via email with the poet on 3rd March, 2025, Kagayi reflected on the role of performance in his poetry, stating that:

From the first time I ever watched a poetry recital, my spirit was convicted to the immediacy of the power of/in performance poetry and its impact on the audience's mindset to influence social change through verbal and body language. And I needed no academic accreditation to begin practising it. Just the dedication of my soul and creativity. (Kagayi)

Kagayi's passion for performance has shaped his connection to it, as the quote states. He believes that performance is a strong channel of a message's delivery, which will have an impact on the audience. He is of the view that performing poetry is not based on scholarly knowledge but dedication and creativity. With years of practice, he can guide his composed and written poetry into performance and transform performances into written poetry. Since he composes and

performs, and also either transfers the oral composition to the page or directly writes down the poem before performance, he can create distinct yet interconnected performed and written versions of poetry. Kagayi emphasizes that a poem expresses itself through performance, becoming a living, functional memory for the listener. The elements of the poem come alive on stage, transforming into shared experiences and emotions that the audience can easily relate to. Performance enhances the aesthetic experience, making the poem feel vibrant and deeply engaging.

J. L. Austin provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the concept of poetry as a performative text. He distinguishes between constative utterances, which describe the world, and performative utterances, which accomplish actions through speaking, such as making a promise, apologizing, or making a declaration (Austin 6-8). In this light, poetry can be seen not just as representational and describing a situation but also as action-oriented. When performed, Kagayi's poetry demonstrates the capacity to act: it names, challenges, disrupts, questions, and affirms, making it a form of social action. The language in his poetry is not merely expressive but transformative, performing critical social functions.

Judith Butler builds on Austin's insights in her seminal work "Gender Trouble," where she reframes performativity as a continuous process through which identities and meanings are constituted. She emphasizes the crucial capacity of language in framing collective reality and the power of language to bring things into existence. For Butler, repeated linguistic and bodily acts create societal realities (Butler 25-26). Therefore, Kagayi's performances can be viewed as acts of cultural and political inscription, expressing defiance, belonging, and Ugandan identity. The body and voice of the performance poet, Kagayi, become instruments of cultural memory and resistance.

Throughout this section and the broader chapter, I provide a nuanced exploration of performance poetry, concentrating specifically on Kagayi's work. By treating performance poetry as a distinct literary mode, this analysis deepens our understanding of Kagayi's poetry in performance, viewing the poem not just as a literary object but as a performative text that is enacted, embodied, and situated in time and space. W. F. Hanks, in *Text and Textuality*, offers a critical framework for understanding such a view of text. He argues that text is not simply a fixed, written product but a dynamic social practice, "a configuration of signs that is coherently interpretable by some community of users" and one that acquires meaning through its situatedness in context and performance (Hanks 96). This theoretical framing is essential to understanding Kagayi's poetry as a *living text*, one that materializes through the poet's physical voice, gestures, timing, and engagement with the audience. It is also important to note that 'text' here refers to the performed poems of Kagayi, and therefore, it should not cause confusion.

Hanks also critiques the narrow treatment of text as a static artifact, instead calling for attention to its "voicing," the relational and participatory dimensions that locate a text within a framework of authorship, audience, and sociocultural performance (102–103). This helps us see that when Kagayi performs his poems, he is not merely presenting a pre-written script, but actively generating meaning in collaboration with his audience. His poems are "centered," in Hanks' terms, because their full significance emerges only when grounded in their specific social and political performance contexts (106–107). Vicki Bertram similarly asserts that the distinction between a poet's performance and written work is often negligible; the poet's voice can usually still be discerned in the text, suggesting a continuity between oral and written forms. What matters most, then, is that Kagayi's voice, its urgency, cadence, and conviction, remain audible both on page and stage.

Ruth Harrison’s assertion that “performance poetry is about the stage; it is about getting up there” (Breeze et al. 27–28) captures this embodied urgency. Once a poet steps onto the stage and animates their poem, they perform their text. Kagayi’s poetic enactments are thus not ancillary to the written text; they are the text in its most complete and socially resonant form. As he revealed in my interview with him, the performance not only shapes meaning but brings it to life:

In performance, the poem speaks itself and it is made an embodiment of a living and functional memory to/of/for/by the listener; In performance, the elements of the poem perform themselves and inadvertently become sensibilities of the audience, creating a more palatable relatability; Performance adds aesthetic value to the experience of witnessing the idea of a living poem. (Kagayi)

In this sense, following Hanks, Kagayi’s performance poems should be read as textual events, open, provisional, incomplete until concretized through performance (105). They are sites where literary meaning, sociopolitical critique, and communal dialogue converge. Kagayi’s explanation resonates with the perspectives of Rui Torres and Sandra Guerreiro Dias, who conceptualize poetry as an event, action, and embodied experience. To them, the fact that performances are temporary and can’t be replicated is what makes them special and distinctive (Torres and Dias 93). Performance unfolds in real time with the energy, emotions, and interactions between the performer, audience, and environment creating a unique, one-time experience that cannot be exactly reproduced. It is this uniqueness that makes performance compelling to the audience. Performance is a living art, with the written poem sometimes serving as its linguistic artifact, and to illustrate this concept further, I have designed a basic diagram:

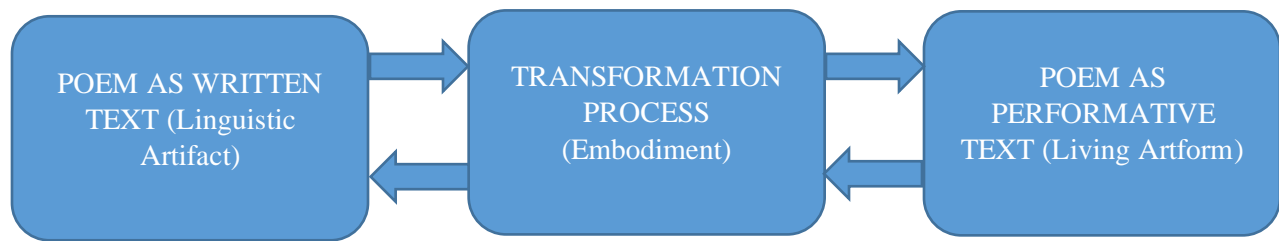


Illustration 1: Understanding the Poem as a Performative Text

The illustration aptly encapsulates the chapter's central theme, depicting an oral or written poem as a linguistic artifact that transforms through embodiment, emerging as a performative text and living art. The reverse arrows indicate that performative text can end up as written text or vice versa.

Similar to Kiguli's (1994) observation about the works of Tanure Ojaide, Niyi Osundare, and Steve Chimombo, poets whose texts display oral and performative features that suggest a listening audience even when read silently (Kiguli 24), Kagayi's poetry likewise insists on performance as part of its textual meaning. His use of alliteration, consonance, assonance, and apostrophe, as well as his incorporation of images that necessitate gesture, voice, and costume, all point to an active audience and an embodied performance context.

To understand this performance context more precisely, it is important to recognize that context is not simply external or supplementary to the text. As Hugh J. Silverman notes, context "is what accompanies the text," but also "what is rendered text" through the act of textualization (Silverman 59). In this sense, the socio-political, historical, and cultural environments that Kagayi draws upon, such as Uganda's postcolonial realities and linguistic politics, are not merely external settings; they are textured through his poetry and therefore become intrinsic to its structure and meaning. Performance, in this regard, becomes one of the modes through which context is activated, embodied, and brought into play.

Similarly, W. F. Hanks emphasizes that a text's meaning is never fully contained within its formal boundaries; instead, textuality arises from the ways in which texts are produced, received, and interpreted in particular social interactions (Hanks 96–97). Thus, Kagayi's poetry should not be analyzed as an isolated literary object, but as what Hanks would call a "textual event" (105), an

instance where the text acquires meaning through its material and social performance. The convergence of poetic techniques and embodied delivery in Kagayi's work, therefore, underscores the role of the performer, the presence of an engaged audience, and the sensory immediacy of the poetic moment. Context, then, is not a backdrop; it is enacted and made meaningful through the poem's performance.

Barber's intervention further deepens this understanding of textuality by challenging the idea that texts are defined by writing alone. She argues that what makes something textual is not inscription but "the quality of being joined together and given a recognizable existence as form" (Barber 1). This idea is especially useful when reading Kagayi's performed poetry, where repetition, rhythm, gesture, and vocal variation work together to create a recognizable textual form that exists beyond the printed page. Barber also explains that texts are intentionally designed to stand apart from everyday conversation so that they may be "repeated, quoted and commented upon," giving them a special, semi-independent existence, even when they are oral rather than written (3). Importantly, she emphasizes that this apparent independence does not detach texts from social life; instead, all texts remain "forms of action, speech acts embedded in the context of their emission and reception" (3). Seen through this perspective, Kagayi's poetry functions both as text and action: it is created for circulation, recall, and re-performance, while also influencing specific political and cultural moments through live delivery. Barber's statement that "texts are social facts" and are "used to do things" (3) emphasizes that Kagayi's performances do more than just offer a decolonial critique; they actively enact it, turning the poetic moment into a public act of resistance. Therefore, meaning arises not only from the text itself but from the dynamic relationship between performer, audience, and socio-historical context, showing that Kagayi's poetry reaches its full significance through performance.

In the poem “In 2065,” Kagayi envisions a dystopian Uganda, where citizens look back with regret for their silence in the face of political oppression. Yet it is not only the poem’s content that carries weight. Its performance is deeply charged with urgency and embodied meaning. Dressed in a plain white T-shirt and brownish trousers, with dark shades shielding his eyes and a black head-sock covering his hair, Kagayi stands under the sun, anchored to a standing microphone in the open courtyard of Makerere University’s Art Gallery. This physical restriction does not diminish the poem’s vitality; instead, it concentrates his energy into the expressive use of his hands, which take on the role of pacing, emphasizing, and even punctuating the text. His gestures are sharp and deliberate, underscoring the rising emotional intensity of his delivery.

As he repeats key lines, particularly those forecasting that nothing will change by 2065, his voice rises, stretches, and breaks into an almost prophetic cry:

In 2065 nothing will have changed that much,
Except I will be over 70 years. (Kagayi 00:31-00:38)

This repetition, far from redundancy, becomes a performative strategy: it builds anticipation, amplifies urgency, and embeds the sense of inevitable doom within the listener’s body. The line becomes not just a prediction but a warning. The audience, though not visible, can be heard laughing nervously and clapping at the end, responses that reflect the tension between humor, fear, and recognition in the poem’s dystopic vision. Kagayi’s limited spatial movement is compensated for by his commanding vocal tone and gestural language, making the performance both visually and sonically powerful. His body becomes the site where meaning is forged and delivered, collapsing the boundary between text and performer. In this way, “In 2065” is not merely spoken but enacted as a socio-political ritual of remembrance, confrontation, and urgency.

The persona in Kagayi's "In 2065" is convinced that the only noticeable change by the year 2065 will be his age. Everything else will remain the same or perhaps worsen. In the first stanza, he paints a bleak picture: the roads will still have potholes, politics will remain corrupt, and the urban chaos of Kampala will persist unchanged. Notably, the performer never discloses the current year in any performance, leaving 2065 as an elastic, floating future, perpetually within reach. This manipulation of time is one of the performance's most noticeable elements. It creates a liminal zone in which the future collapses into the present. Time feels disjointed and stagnant, allowing Kagayi to play prophet, citizen, and victim all at once. In doing so, the performance becomes a kind of ritualized pronouncement delivered with wry humor but underlined by political fatigue.

Kagayi's delivery is deliberately restrained: standing rooted to a microphone in an open courtyard, dressed in a white T-shirt, brown trousers, and dark shades, he maintains a still yet commanding presence. His voice carries the emotional weight of the poem, controlled but weighted with despair. Each time he repeats the phrase "nothing will have changed that much," his voice rises, stretches, and trembles, turning the repetition into a performative indictment of a nation locked in stasis. His tone oscillates between sarcasm and lament, and his hands, his only free instrument in a stationary setup, punctuate his speech with gestures that seem to beat against an invisible wall. The hands lead his pacing, guide his emphasis, and fill in the gaps left by his restricted movement. His posture, still, upright, watchful, enhances the prophetic urgency of his words.

This poem, when performed, is deeply rooted in oral tradition, drawing from the rhythms of spoken language and the musicality of repetition. The refrain "nothing will have changed that much" recurs like a chorus in traditional oral poetry, and Kagayi's performance of it, delivered with slight tonal variation and accompanied by deliberate hand gestures, gives it both musical and rhetorical

weight. The repeated line, performed with a rising voice and outward motion of the arms, captures a mixture of resignation and defiance. The performer's tone embodies this duality: it is not merely conversational but layered with irony, fatigue, and subtle provocation. One can hear in Kagayi's cadence the exhaustion of a citizen who has said these words too many times before, and yet still insists on saying them again.

What makes the performance especially compelling is how the poet channels the voice of the everyday Ugandan, using colloquial expressions such as "boda-boda man," "a West Nile witch doctor," and "Major General Something." These are not names but categories, generic placeholders that stand in for widely recognized social figures without identifying individuals. This technique creates both distance and familiarity. It protects the speaker from direct accusation while still calling out institutional dysfunction. The phrase "Major General Something" is particularly loaded. It mocks the high rank of the military class by reducing its specificity to a vague "Something", a strategy that trivializes and dehumanizes the figure while, paradoxically, elevating the persona who dares to speak against him. Here, the performer's refusal to name becomes a powerful form of critique, suggesting both political caution and creative resistance.

The moment involving fried beans, when students strike over food and are answered with military force, is laced with cruel irony. The line plays like a joke in the performance, provoking laughter from the audience, but its subtext is tragic. It reveals the absurdity of power, where a legitimate student grievance is met with reckless violence. The audience's reaction, nervous laughter, applause, marks a collective unease. They recognize the scenario all too well. The absurdity lies not only in the disproportionate response of the Major General but also in the youthful bravado of the students who risk their lives for a meal. Kagayi presents a society where both rebellion and

repression spiral into senselessness, and he stages this with theatrical minimalism that forces the weight of the message onto the performer's body and voice.

This is precisely what makes "In 2065" a performance of liminality and transformation in Turner and Schechner's sense. It is not a poem to be read in silence but to be spoken aloud, heard, and felt. The performer's physical gestures, changes in vocal tone, strategic silences, and invocation of familiar public roles enact a kind of communal ritual, a space where pain, irony, laughter, and memory converge. In this way, the poem is transformed from text to lived experience; its words become, in Ian Davidson's formulation, "flesh" (Davidson 106). The poem exists not merely in its lines but in the charged space between the performer, the audience, and the sociopolitical reality it reflects.

The poem's central theme of inertia emerges most significantly here. The persona changes, he ages, he observes, he aches, but the world around him refuses to respond. Roads remain cracked. Leaders remain untouchable. Power remains unshaken. This dissonance between the developing self and static systems creates a tense liminality, where the future holds no promise of transformation. Kagayi's poem occupies this in-between state: it mourns a nation that cannot evolve, and its performance dramatizes the emotional toll of such stasis. As listeners, we are drawn into this suspended reality, and we too feel the frustration, the slow boil of political inertia against the restless aspirations of the citizen. The performance of "In 2065" transforms the written text into living art, what Ian Davidson describes as "the word made flesh" in performance (Davidson 106). The poem's words become physically and emotionally embodied through the performer's tone, pace, and controlled but evocative gestures.

Exaggeration, particularly the hyperbolic claim that *nothing* will change, serves a strategic role here. It allows the performer to expose the absurdity of normalized dysfunction. The future is rendered not unimaginable but terrifyingly predictable. The minimalist stage, his unchanging stance, and the tight repetition form a closed circuit that mirrors the claustrophobia of the poem's imagined world. Yet, performance does not only convey; it also conceals. Notably, in recent performances, Kagayi has omitted a provocative stanza involving the Ugandan president in a wheelchair in the future and his son, a self-proclaimed Field Marshal. When questioned at the 2022 Urbanities Summer Institute at the Margaret Trowell School of Fine Arts, he first claimed he had forgotten the stanza; in later performances, he laughed it off when asked. These omissions gesture toward a politics of self-censorship, perhaps driven by fear of state reprisal.

This is not an isolated phenomenon. Ugandan poet Stella Nyanzi and novelist Kakwenza Rukirabashaija have both faced arrest and torture for their outspoken criticism of the state. In earlier eras, dramatist Byron Kawadwa was murdered under Idi Amin's regime, while Malawian poet Jack Mapanje was imprisoned without charge under Kamuzu Banda. Within such a climate, the stage becomes an ambivalent space, a platform for dissent and a site of surveillance. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power (Foucault 202), as discussed in *Discipline and Punish*, is useful here. The body of the performer is not merely a conduit for resistance; it is also subjected to invisible constraints. The performer's omissions, silences, and laughter may signify internalized discipline, the subtle and self-imposed boundaries that arise in response to power. "*In 2065*" becomes more than a lament. It is also a document of the risks entailed in speaking truth to power, where even prophecy must be measured, and satire must navigate danger. Schechner views performance as a space for transformation for individuals and communities (Schechner 110). Thus,

the performance of this poem allows for liminality and transformation while advocating for change.

The performance of “In 2065” activates a shared historical consciousness while simultaneously demanding present-day reflection. This is particularly resonant in a Ugandan context marked by past regimes of surveillance, brutality, and silencing. Kagayi’s performance does not merely depict a hypothetical future; it resonates with the legacies of Amin’s dictatorship and more recent authoritarian tendencies, creating a tension between memory and foresight. In this way, the stage becomes a site where past violence, present anxiety, and future uncertainty converge. His strategic use of pauses, tonal variation, and subtle eye contact with the audience heightens this tension, creating moments of emotional vulnerability and communal recognition.

A close examination of Kagayi’s language reveals that the poem’s power rests not only in what is said but in how it is said. The modal verb “will” appears frequently in the poem, establishing a sense of fixed futurity: “Except I will be over 70 years,” “the roads will be the same,” “the politics will be the same,” (0:17–0:40). Yet, as J. L. Austin argues in *How to Do Things with Words*, such utterances are not passive descriptions, they are performative acts (Austin 6–8). Kagayi uses “will” not only to express what is expected but also to reveal necessity, fatalism, and irony. In some instances, it conveys a warning; in others, it betrays resignation. The repetition of “will” across different scenes functions as a speech act that does more than predict; it convicts. The future is not a distant abstraction; it is being authored in the present through both action and inaction, and the performer’s voice insists that the audience is complicit in this authorship.

Kagayi’s delivery intensifies this effect. His deliberate pacing and his emphatic tone on repeated lines like “nothing will have changed that much” produce a rhythm that is both monotonous and

haunting, emphasizing the weight of stasis and the trauma of a circular political history. These verbal choices, paired with the stillness of his posture and the deliberate gestures he makes while uttering each “will,” invite the listener into a liminal space, where the audience is forced to reflect on their own role in shaping the nation’s future. This is precisely where Schechner’s notion of performance as transformation becomes relevant (Schechner 70–72). Kagayi’s stage is not just a platform; it is a ritual space that blurs the line between performer and spectator, present and future, poetry and prophecy.

In this way, the performance summons emotional engagement, stirs guilt, and provokes a sense of collective responsibility. It achieves what Austin calls “perlocutionary effect” (101–102), the emotional and cognitive impact on the audience, as well as what Schechner explores as the transformative potential of performance (122–129). Kagayi is not merely narrating a future; he is staging it, contesting it, and implicating the audience in its prevention or realization. The power of “In 2065” lies in its capacity to collapse time, enact possibility, and demand accountability.

The performance of “In 2065” opens with Kagayi embodying the voice of a young persona shaped by a working-class upbringing in urban Uganda. Before his poems begin, he often delivers a brief preamble, especially in more recent performances, stating that the poem reflects how children, particularly in city environments, construct their identity through observation and experience. This framing situates the audience within a domestic and familiar space, from which the poem slowly spirals into the absurd and dystopian. The performer appears grounded and alert, his voice steady but inquisitive, as though guided by his immediate surroundings and memories. This opening sets the stage for the poem’s emotional and political crescendo.

A noticeable example of the poem's satire and hyperbole occurs in a vivid stanza midway through the performance:

U.R.A will be taxing the air we breathe,
The many times couples kiss,
The fart we excrete,
The way we die,
And the way we speak
And will determine those who go to heaven
And those to hell
And tax their corpses differently. (Kagayi 01:25-01:44)

In performance, this section is delivered with exuberant irony and rising energy. Kagayi gestures animatedly, pausing dramatically before phrases like “the fart we excrete,” allowing space for the audience's laughter to swell and release. This stanza blends the private and public, the sacred and absurd, the bodily and bureaucratic, creating a sense of national pandemonium where the state extends its control into every crevice of life, even into death. The conglomeration of verbs and the unpredictable range of actions (to breathe, kiss, fart, speak, die) combine to produce a humorous yet unsettling image of omnipresent authority. The laughter from the audience is uneasy, not only because the content is absurd, but because the satire feels disturbingly plausible. Kagayi's voice in this moment carries anger disguised as jest, and his expression, serious yet playful, deepens the tension between what is imagined and what is real.

This performance thus engages time in complex ways. Kagayi's disclaimer, “This poem is ten years old, so if you take offence, your issue is with time, not with me” (0:00–0:11), was especially notable during this October 2022 performance at the Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts at Makerere University. Here, time becomes both a shield and a weapon: it distances the speaker from potential political backlash while reminding the audience that the poem's warnings are neither new nor imaginary. Drawing from Francis Anolue's insights on time as layered and

performative, Kagayi's delivery blurs past, present, and future. Anolue argues that in postcolonial and neoliberal contexts, time itself becomes politicized and alienating, structured by regimes of control that entrap people in cycles of repetition and perceived stasis (Anolue 41–42). Kagayi's satirical return to a projected but unchanged 2065 reflects this alienation, dramatizing how Ugandans may age while political dysfunction remains frozen in time. Time becomes circular, elastic, always returning to the same unresolved crises. As Barber reminds us, in performance, the past is not simply recalled but re-lived, and the text itself becomes a living repository of cultural and political memory (187–188).

The tone of the performance also reflects a balance between resignation and resistance. Kagayi infuses the poem with rhythmic shifts, switching between colloquial speech and lyrical repetition, allowing emotion to seep through pauses and accelerations. His body leans forward as he utters lines like “tax their corpses differently,” suggesting incredulity and moral urgency. The emotive force of sarcasm, anger, and irony is not simply textual; it is brought into being. This links directly with Hanks' understanding of text as a social event that materializes in context (Hanks 96–97). Kagayi's gestures, intonation, and interaction with the audience make “In 2065” a performative text that lives beyond the page.

Kagayi's gestures add another layer of meaning to the words he speaks. These gestures are more than mere embellishments; they embody the themes and emotions of the poems themselves. He invests a lot of effort into gesture and movement on stage.

Makerere will be on strike
And Major General something
Will order open fireeee on the students
Because their demand for fried beans
Will be a threat to the security of the State. (Kagayi 01:11-01:25)

From the poem “In 2065” previously discussed, I notice in the performance of this poem Kagayi uses his hands to form a gun opening fire onto the audience who were now taking the place of the students in the poem, and still, in the performance, he utters the word ‘fire’ in an onomatopoeic manner, emphasizing the point that while the university students of Makerere are noticeable in demand for a minor change, one of the Generals, who will find that this minor strike is a major threat to national security will order the shooting of these students.

Drawing on Richard Schechner’s concept of “restored behaviour”, where gestures, expressions, and bodily actions are stylized and repeated to convey intensified meaning, Kagayi’s physical movements in “In 2065” become ritualized acts of political and emotional expression (Schechner 35). His gestures are not casual or incidental; they are deliberate, exaggerated, and rhythmically timed to echo the poem’s satirical but urgent tone. For instance, when Kagayi declares, “nothing will have changed that much,” he often stretches out his arms broadly, palms open and facing upward, as if physically showing the vastness of the unchanging reality. This wide, sweeping gesture reflects the scale of political inertia the persona is lamenting, transforming an abstract critique into a visible, almost burdensome weight the performer seems to carry.

Throughout the performance, Kagayi’s repetition of gestures such as pointing to the ground when referencing local streets or raising his voice and hand during references to violence becomes a kind of choreographed indictment. These repeated movements accumulate symbolic power: they are performed each time not as spontaneous expression, but as what Schechner would call “twice-behaved behaviour” (35), gestures that recall earlier performances and carry historical and emotional memory into the current one. In this sense, Kagayi’s body does not merely accompany the poem; it performs the nation’s stagnation, fear, fatigue, and defiance.

His relatively fixed posture at the microphone contrasts with the expressive mobility of his hands, which do the work of navigating the poem's emotional terrain. Whether mimicking a salute to mock state militarism or holding his hands still while delivering lines about institutional decay, Kagayi's gestures transform the stage into a space where Uganda's sociopolitical trauma is both witnessed and relived. His body becomes a site of struggle, where political realities are not only narrated but embodied and contested in real time.

By weaving together tools of orality, including repetition, character embodiment, rhythm, and vernacular speech, the poet reclaims the stage as a space of critique and transformation. This aligns with Schechner's view of performance as liminal, a space where meaning is made through shared presence and risk (Schechner 70–72). In Kagayi's hands, the poem is not only a prophecy of a broken future but a confrontation with the present that constructs it. The audience is implicated, laughed with, spoken to, and made to feel both amused and uneasy. The poem breathes with urgency and satire, and the performance makes that breath felt.

A further notable example is “How I Grew Up,” in which Kagayi performs irony through vocal stress, tonal modulation, and gesture cues:

I picked my civilization from monkeys in trees
I picked my attitude from sovereign polar bears living in skyscrapers overseas
I picked my tongue from a brainwashed teacher
I picked my degree from a brainwashing factory of underpaid, unemployed employees
Who auction street strikes just by walking to work
I hear they pay sex for marks... (Kagayi 00:33-00:59)

Here, the repetition of the phrase “I picked my...” creates a rhythmic structure that aids oral delivery and also mirrors the persona's fragmented and involuntary process of cultural formation. Kagayi performs this repetition with tonal variation, starting with a mildly ironic tone, then layering it with increasing frustration. He pauses momentarily after “I picked my tongue from a

brainwashed teacher,” using silence to give weight to the internalized colonial education system, before quickening the pace in the next line about “a brainwashing factory,” underscoring the systemic decay of universities. The climax comes with “I hear they pay sex for marks,” which he delivers with sharp emphasis, followed by a noticeable pause. This beat allows the audience to absorb both the humor and discomfort of the line, laughter mixed with unease.

Through such moments, Kagayi activates what Bauman and Sherzer refer to as the “emergent quality of performance”, the idea that meaning is not fixed in the text but comes alive in interaction with the audience (Bauman and Sherzer 9). Each utterance is a site of negotiation, and Kagayi’s performance uses gesture, eye movement, vocal dynamics, and timing to animate every line. For instance, when he references “monkeys in trees” and “sovereign polar bears,” his mock-serious tone and exaggerated facial expressions underline the absurdity of colonial and neocolonial identity impositions. Similarly, when he later recalls the smell of his father’s shoes or buying poetry from a beggar, he softens his voice and narrows his gestures, signaling a shift into a more intimate register. These moments deepen the poem’s emotional and narrative complexity.

Performance transforms “How I Grew Up” from poetic monologue into embodied social critique. Kagayi’s body becomes a semiotic tool, his voice, gestures, and facial expressions turning words into actions. As Bauman and Briggs argue, performance creates a framework where both the speaker and the audience are reflexively aware of the event as a site of meaning-making (Bauman and Briggs 73). In Kagayi’s delivery, this reflexivity is heightened. He appears constantly aware of how the audience is processing each line and adjusts accordingly, either pushing harder into satire or pulling back into personal narrative.

By questioning the credibility of education systems, the emptiness of inherited cultural values, and the blurred lines between authority and absurdity, Kagayi's performance becomes electrifying. His delivery is humorous yet cutting, rhythmic yet unsettling, personal yet broadly political. The poem thus functions not just as a recollection of youth but as a critical map of how identity is shaped by disjointed influences, colonial residue, economic strain, and institutional betrayal, all performed with the urgency and elasticity that only the stage can fully sustain.

The repeated lines in the poetic conclusion, "I repeat, I am learning to take defeat" (Kagayi 02:55–03:05), act as a refrain of vulnerability and defiance. In the performance, Kagayi delivers these lines slowly, pausing deliberately between "I repeat" and "I am learning," then elongating the phrase "to take defeat" with a low, heavy tone. His voice slightly falters, his posture remains still, and he momentarily drops one of his gesturing hands to his side, an embodied performance of exhaustion and self-awareness. These moments of pause and tonal retreat create a resonant vulnerability that recruits the audience into a shared emotional space, one shaped not by victory but by perseverance through loss.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity provides a useful lens for unpacking this moment. Butler argues that identity is not a stable core but "a doing," a set of repeated acts that constitute who we are (Butler 25). Kagayi, by repeating the act of confessing his defeat, does not merely state failure. He becomes the subject shaped by and responding to structures of disempowerment. The repetition of the line functions as what Butler calls a performative utterance, where the "saying" is also a "doing," and thus the poet is not only recounting a loss but staging his becoming through it.

Moreover, Kagayi's admission of defeat in front of a live audience subverts cultural expectations of the Ugandan man as stoic or invulnerable. In the very act of performing defeat, he queers the

rigid scripts of political and masculine identity, creating space for what Butler might term a “discontinuous gendered being” that resists coherence and control (23). The refrain becomes both a confession and an act of resistance, a way of naming one’s injury while also owning the process of learning from it.

This vulnerability, when made public on stage, transforms the poem from static text into an emotionally charged performance of self-definition. It no longer merely describes personal growth; it enacts it. As Butler notes, there is “no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25). Similarly, Kagayi’s identity as a poet-citizen-critic is forged in this act of spoken repetition. Each time he speaks the line, he reconstitutes his place within a social structure that continually undermines him, while also resisting it through the vulnerability of public performance.

The audiences in Kagayi’s performances are not passive recipients. They become part of the poetic experience through vocal reactions, gestures, laughter, and even silence. In “How I Grew Up,” for example, when Kagayi delivers the lines “I hear they pay sex for marks” or “I picked my tongue from a brainwashed teacher,” there is a ripple of laughter and murmurs, but also noticeable pauses where the audience seems to process the biting social commentary. This live reaction becomes part of the performance’s rhythm. As Richard Schechner notes, performance is “twice-behaved behavior”, a rehearsed act that changes in real time based on audience engagement (Schechner 35). Kagayi’s delivery reflects this: he adjusts his timing, intensifies his gestures, or extends his pauses depending on the crowd’s mood. The poem evolves not as a fixed script, but as a shared event, a co-creation between speaker and listener.

This interaction transforms the performance from monologue into dialogue, even when the audience doesn't speak. Kagayi often points outward, or pauses after rhetorical questions, such as "Questioning why do humans compete?" as if inviting the audience to reflect and respond internally. These performative cues acknowledge the audience as participants in the construction of meaning. In this way, Kagayi's poetry lives not only in the voice of the performer but in the space between speaker and listener, a liminal zone where emotion, memory, and critique converge.

This dynamic is especially powerful in "How I Grew Up", where issues of identity and context are central. The poem's speaker crafts a self from fragmented, often absurd sources: monkeys in trees, polar bears overseas, colonial education systems, and underpaid lecturers. The performance amplifies these images with irony and rhythm, but it also reveals how identity is not fixed but contingent on environment, history, and perception. Kagayi does not merely describe identity; he enacts its making, and in doing so, implicates the audience in that process. Each nod, laugh, or pause becomes part of a collective negotiation of what it means to grow up in a society where values are blurred, systems are broken, and memory is political.

In this sense, Kagayi's poetry aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia, the presence of multiple voices and worldviews within a single utterance (Bakhtin 292). In "How I Grew Up," this heteroglossic layering is not only textual but performative. The poem is composed almost entirely of a series of ironic declarations that begin with the repeated line "I picked my...", followed by a mixture of absurd, grotesque, and socially charged images: "I picked my civilization from monkeys in trees", "I picked my attitude from sovereign polar bears living in skyscrapers overseas", and "I picked my degree from a brainwashing factory of underpaid, unemployed employees." These lines reference colonial education, global capitalism, and Uganda's socio-

political dysfunctions. Kagayi picks and reassembles these fragments of global and local ideologies, much like a child absorbing narratives from media, teachers, parents, and peers, thereby enacting identity as an ideological bricolage.

The performance heightens this heteroglossic tension. Kagayi uses a deliberately sarcastic tone, exaggerating vocal pitch when saying phrases like “brainwashed teacher” or “sovereign polar bears”, which evokes laughter from the audience but also sharpens the critique. His pauses after each line allow the irony to settle, as if daring the audience to find themselves in the critique. These pauses function not just as aesthetic choices but as performative punctuation, guiding how each “voice” within the poem is heard and judged.

Moreover, Kagayi’s performance incorporates vernacular rhythms and urban Ugandan speech, evident in lines like “I hear they pay sex for marks” and “I picked my brother from Ben Kiwanuka Street...” These references root the performance in specific urban realities that the audience easily recognizes. Such phrases mirror the cadence of everyday Kampala talk, filled with wit, colloquialism, and coded social knowledge. This oral quality doesn’t just imitate reality; it stages it. The poet’s body, voice, and delivery become channels through which these layered social voices are voiced, mocked, and contested. The audience, hearing their realities refracted back at them through irony and rhythm, becomes both implicated and engaged.

Thus, Kagayi’s performance does not simply voice a singular self; it stages a dialogue of selves, each formed by different power structures: colonialism, neoliberalism, religion, the state, and street culture. His voice carries these discourses into conflict and harmony, embodying Bakhtin’s vision of the poem as a space where “languages and worldviews meet, clash, and mutually influence one

another" (Bakhtin 292). In performance, these tensions become physical, tonal, and affective, transforming the poem into a site of social interrogation.

Furthermore, Marvin Carlson's notion of "presence" in performance, the unique energy of immediacy and shared time, helps explain why Kagayi's poetry cannot be fully appreciated on the page alone. Carlson argues that performance produces a "ghosting" effect, where prior experiences, cultural memories, and historical associations are recalled and superimposed on the present moment (Carlson 7). This is especially evident in "In 2065", where Kagayi's repeated refrain "nothing will have changed that much" reverberates with political fatigue, recalling the unchanging realities of Ugandan governance across decades. The performance becomes a haunted space, not just by the dystopian future it imagines, but by recognizable ghosts of past regimes and crises, Amin's brutality, the erasure of dissent, the repetition of military violence. When Kagayi raises his voice to announce that in 2065 soldiers will be made to open fire on students, the line lands with more than poetic force; it carries historical memory, echoing known acts of repression that live on in the audience's consciousness. This is Carlson's ghosting in action: the performance summons the past into the present.

In "How I Grew Up," the ghosting effect operates differently but no less significantly. Kagayi stitches together his persona's identity using surreal fragments: monkeys in trees, polar bears in skyscrapers, brainwashed teachers, buying poetry, all of which reflect not just fantasy, but layers of historical and cultural imposition. Each image resonates with the residues of colonial education, urban struggle, and generational inheritance. The performance evokes these layers through tone and gesture: when he speaks of "a brainwashing factory of underpaid, unemployed employees," his rising vocal inflection and emphatic hand movements animate the institutional memory of

Uganda's disillusioned youth. The ghosts here are those of abandoned ideals, discredited institutions, and fractured identities, made present through embodied performance.

In both poems, Kagayi's voice, posture, and rhythm serve as conduits for memory, transforming the stage into a site of reckoning and reflection. What Carlson calls the "haunted body of the performer" (7) becomes visible: Kagayi does not merely narrate historical weight; he carries it, allowing the past to leak into the present moment. His poetry, when performed, becomes an act of historical remembrance, collective mourning, and political challenge, charged with the energy of those absent presences that performance uniquely revives.

In sum, understanding Kagayi's poetry as a performative text means recognizing that meaning is generated not solely by the words themselves but by how they are delivered, embodied, and received. The text becomes a live occurrence shaped by poetic voice, audience engagement, historical context, and cultural resonance. Kagayi's work challenges us to think of poetry not just as a form to read, but as a living act that calls us to listen, feel, and respond.

3.2. Deepening Understanding in Kagayi's Poetry Performances

Kagayi's poetry is brought to life not just through the words he speaks but through a dynamic interaction of several performance elements. These elements include rhythm, gesture, costume and makeup, space, and audience interaction, all of which are integral to the delivery of his work. By exploring how these elements work together, his poetry transforms into an embodied, shared experience, where meaning is not only communicated but actively co-created by the poet-performer and his audience. This section examines how Kagayi's use of specific performance elements deepens the impact of his performed poetry, especially concerning the political and social themes he explores.

Costume in Kagayi's performance is far from incidental; it is a deliberate semiotic tool that amplifies meaning and deepens the poem's political and cultural resonance. His choice of clothing, such as the white gown with large square patches of black, yellow, and red (Uganda's flag colors), becomes a visual script running parallel to the verbal one. These color-coded garments operate symbolically, evoking both the nation-state in *For My Negativity* and the postcolonial classroom in *No Speaking Vernacular*⁶, thus anchoring his body within deeply contextualized meanings.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity reminds us that the body is not a neutral surface but one "already interpreted by cultural meanings" and continuously constituted by the very acts it performs (Butler 12). The costume, then, is part of this process: it "marks" the body, not just as decoration, but as an extension of cultural and political signification. The act of donning national colors in *For My Negativity* becomes a performance of Ugandan identity, transforming the performer into a living emblem of collective memory, critique, and resistance.

Richard Schechner similarly argues that everything the performer does, including what they wear, is "restored behavior," carrying prior meanings into the performance space (Schechner 35). Costumes, in this sense, are layered signs, performing history and ideology as much as aesthetic identity. In Kagayi's work, the costume does not simply "represent" the nation; it embodies it, asserting presence, reclaiming voice, and making visible the sociopolitical stakes of the performance.

Photographic stills of Kagayi in costume further illustrate how his attire contributes to the textual density of the performance, drawing the audience's eye to his body as a site of meaning-making.

⁶ *For My Negativity* and *No Speaking Vernacular* are also available as published books and Kagayi turned both poems into drama.

His clothing, gestures, and vocal delivery merge to form a complex semiotic system, what Butler would describe as the “stylized repetition of acts” that produce meaning over time (Butler 43).

Patrice Pavis emphasizes that costume in performance acts as a “visual sign capable of generating symbolic, psychological, and social effects beyond its material form” (Dictionary 71). Kagayi appears to be fully conscious of this potential, as he has mentioned in interviews. When he wears attire that resembles colonial systems, he does more than simply portray those systems; he questions them. His costume choices prompt the audience to view the familiar with a new sense of discomfort, transforming the stage into a space where clothing communicates, accuses, and resists. By working with social and linguistic codes, he extends the poem, showing that the poet’s voice is both heard and visible.



Figures 8 & 9: Kagayi in costume, performing For My Negativity



Figure 10: Kagayi in a suit, reflecting a teacher brainwashed by colonialism in No Speaking Vernacular



Figure 11: Kagayi in costume and makeup, preparing for a performance of For My Negativity at the Orangerie Theatre in Köln, Germany, for the Africologne Theatre Festival, 2023.

In addition to his careful selection of costume and makeup to make his performances real, Kagayi's gestures, as already demonstrated, are essential to his performances. In his performance at the Writivism⁷ Awards Evening in 2015, Kagayi displays the significance of gestures in performance in the poem, "The Audience Must Say Amen", a powerful reflection on the relationship between poet, audience, and state power. The poem is a meta-poetic meditation on the role of the artist in society, asserting that the poet does not speak in isolation but in resonance with the collective consciousness of the people. Drawing from the idea that "to think the way we think the audience must think that way," the poem insists that poetic expression is not merely individual speech but a shared cognitive and emotional act, shaped by communal values and dissent:

Thus,
When we speak of things that annoy us
And the state decides to silence us
It is not silencing the poets
But silencing the audience
That likes to think that it thinks. (Kagayi 03:46-03:35)

Carlson argues that performance derives meaning from its cultural, social, and historical context. A gesture, speech, or ritual can have vastly different meanings depending on where, how, and by whom it is performed (Carlson 5). The gestures employed by Kagayi in performance are significant for the meaning of his performed poetry.

As Kagayi makes this commentary on censorship and the relationship between art, society, and the state, he relies heavily on gesture to convey layered meaning. In this performance of this poem, he wears no costume. His clothing is casual, intentionally neutral, but his hands become his most expressive tools. They guide not only the poem's rhythm but also its argument, often visually

⁷ Writivism is an initiative, established in August 2013, that supports emerging writers and promotes African Literature.

“explaining” the lines to the audience through dynamic movement. His gestures are not ornamental; they are semiotic extensions of the poem’s logic. This becomes particularly noticeable in the poem’s closing refrain.

As he recites the line “It is not silencing the poets,” Kagayi points directly to himself, momentarily pausing to let the weight of self-reference settle. As he continues, “But silencing the audience...”, he shifts his hand outward, gesturing firmly toward the audience, turning passive listeners into implicated participants. This deliberate transfer of focus from himself to the crowd marks a crucial shift in the poem’s performative argument: it is not the poet who is the real threat, but the thinking audience that resonates with what the poet says.

The final phrase, “the audience that likes to think that it thinks”, is delivered with ironic emphasis. Kagayi slows his delivery here, raising an eyebrow and adjusting his voice to mimic a tone of reflective mockery, almost challenging the audience's self-perception. His phrasing casts doubt on the depth of public critical thinking, suggesting that some forms of political silence are not enforced from above but arise from self-satisfied complacency. The line plays with the illusion of thoughtfulness, critiquing a society that confuses performative agreement with genuine critical engagement.

Through this sequence, Kagayi’s gestures and tonal shifts reinforce the poem’s political thrust: the real danger lies not just in state censorship but in a population that appears reflective while remaining intellectually passive. The performance does not merely speak about repression; it enacts a confrontation, turning the audience into both subject and object of critique.

Furthermore, rhythm is not merely a stylistic choice but an intentional device that heightens both the emotional intensity and political charge of Kagayi's performances. Crucially, rhythm in Kagayi's work is inseparable from gesture; the two are mutually reinforcing systems. His hand movements are not only expressive but rhythmically coordinated with the beat of his voice. The cadence of his delivery guides the rise and fall of his gestures, and in turn, those gestures emphasize pauses, underline punchlines, or mark shifts in tone. In this way, the poem is performed as much through the body as through the voice.

In "The Audience Must Say Amen," the rhythm takes on a sermonic cadence, echoing call-and-response structures found in both religious and political speech. Kagayi's rhetorical repetition of "What am I saying?" is punctuated with a raised hand or a step forward, using gesture to reset and re-anchor the rhythm of the performance. These combined techniques: repetition, pacing, and gesture draw the audience into the poem's embodied flow, making them rhythmically, emotionally, and intellectually engaged. Thus, in Kagayi's performances, gesture and rhythm are inseparable modes of meaning-making. The hands keep time, conduct the poem's emotional register, and allow his body to carry the weight of each phrase. This dynamic fusion aligns with African oral performance traditions, where rhythm is not merely a feature of voice but a kinetic structure that moves through the entire performing body.

This fusion of rhythm and gesture extends significantly into Kagayi's 2022 performance of "Unofficial Metaphors" at the Bridgeworks ArtLab in Berlin. Here, the poem departs from overt political satire and enters a more introspective, emotionally laden register, yet it remains deeply political in its structure and resonance. Kagayi is again confined to a standing microphone, limiting bodily movement but not diminishing expressiveness. His hands conduct the emotional pace of

the poem; rising, falling, pausing, as if mapping the landscape of inner turmoil. The rhythm is shaped by a melancholic piano line, with moments of musical interlude, live guitar, and soft percussion. At the same time, two contemporary dancers echo the narrative in physical form, adding visual interpretation to the poetic text.

The rhythm begins slowly, almost hesitantly, as Kagayi opens with existential questions about clouds, tears, and memory. His tone is subdued, and pauses mark the weight of each metaphor until he reaches the section where the speaker's fears escalate:

... I fear to open my eyes-
truth might stare me in the face and I go blind
I fear to taste your lips-
I might stain them with mine
I fear to talk of these things
I fear to walk in dreams
I fear to fear (*Unofficial* 00:00-00:54)

The rhythm accelerates, his voice intensifies, and his gestures sharpen, as if the poem is breaking under the pressure of unspoken emotion. Then, just as suddenly, the rhythm slows again. The dynamic pacing creates a pulse of vulnerability, mirroring the psychological instability and hesitation of the speaker.

As Paul Zumthor argues, rhythm in oral performance is not simply linguistic; it is a temporal, embodied experience that binds performer and audience in shared affect (Zumthor 52). Kagayi's rhythmic modulations, his breath work, and silences become emotionally communicative. His delivery enacts the central metaphor of the poem, the internal fragmentation of someone caught between longing and fear, presence and absence. Each rhythmic shift reflects this crisis: fast-paced lines rush with emotional pressure, while pauses and drops in tone create space for reflection, grief, and unease.

The poem's title, "Unofficial Metaphors," signals both a rejection of conventional poetic structure and an embrace of raw, unfiltered expression. In essence, the title points to resistance and a reconstruction of the notion of metaphor. The metaphors are "unofficial" in that they are not sanctioned by institutionalized poetic language; they are personal, vulnerable, and subversive. Kagayi personifies abstract states: clouds watching, fear speaking, dreams walking, and uses these personifications not only to poeticize emotion but to politicize silence and internal fragmentation. His repeated use of fear becomes both a thematic motif and a rhythmic refrain, performed with growing emotional strain. This interplay between metaphor and rhythm, where ideas are not only spoken but physically and musically felt, reinforces Kagayi's ability to turn personal vulnerability into performative critique.

In "Unofficial Metaphors," the persona feels compelled to act; to claim connection, intimacy, and agency, but he is held back by a mounting series of fears. These fears are not expressed abstractly; they are encoded into the rhythmic patterns of the performance itself. Kagayi begins in a slow, reflective tempo, almost hesitant, as though speech itself is heavy with emotional weight. As the speaker approaches the poem's repeated lines, "I fear to talk of these things / I fear to walk in dreams / I fear to fear", the pace quickens and the rhythm tightens, signaling mounting anxiety, then slows again in a rhythm of resignation. These shifts in tempo and delivery enact a psychological and emotional stasis, reflecting the speaker's oscillation between awareness and paralysis, desire and retreat. The performance rhythm thus becomes a dramatic structure that mirrors the internal and sociopolitical tensions Kagayi wishes to highlight.

Kagayi has explained that "Unofficial Metaphors" was inspired by a chance encounter with a woman on a bus journey from Nairobi to Kampala, a revelation he shared during his April 2025

performance at Poetry Night Ug, available on YouTube (Kagayi 00:20–00:55). In performance, this origin becomes more than anecdotal; it is dramatized into a metaphor for fleeting human connection, missed opportunities, and unrealized desire. Yet the poem transcends its autobiographical roots. The speaker’s longing to get off the bus, to embrace freedom and love, is continuously thwarted, not by external forces alone, but by internalized fear. The line “the train driver will only stop when he wants to piss” (“Unofficial” 00:09–00:14) becomes a darkly comic metaphor for powerlessness, suggesting that individual desire is often at the mercy of structural constraints, whether emotional, cultural, or political.

Here, Victor Turner’s theory of liminality becomes particularly useful. Turner describes liminality as the in-between state where transformation can occur, a space that exists outside societal norms but often reveals their fragility (Turner 94–95). Kagayi’s persona occupies this liminal space, trapped between action and inaction, between expression and repression. The performance space itself becomes a threshold, where private vulnerability and public critique coexist. Performance is “restored behavior” (Schechner 35), where stylized repetition turns private emotion into symbolic action, allowing the performer to embody collective struggle. Kagayi’s repetition of “I fear to…” functions exactly in this way; both personal confession and political metaphor, exposing the quiet violence of fear as a social condition.

Although the poem’s tone is introspective, its metaphors and rhythm carry weight. The speaker’s reluctance to move, love, or even speak reflects the tension many Ugandans feel, where the desire for change is shadowed by the risks of action. The sadness in the rhythm, accompanied by live music and contemporary dancers during the 2022 Bridgeworks ArtLab performance, intensifies this performance. The collaboration between voice, gesture, rhythm, and body turns the poem into

what Turner would call a “social drama”, a symbolic confrontation with the systems that silence or delay transformation (Turner 11–13, 102–106).

The poem’s title, “Unofficial Metaphors,” signals this layered subtext. These are metaphors that resist official discourse. They are intimate, messy, contradictory, and deeply human. Kagayi uses personification as a powerful sub-type of metaphor, transforming clouds into witnesses, fears into speaking subjects, and dreams into spaces of danger. These metaphors don’t just decorate the poem; they perform it. They move with the rhythm, embodying what Schechner would describe as the body in struggle, expressing what cannot be safely said in literal terms (Schechner 122–129).

In this way, “Unofficial Metaphors” stands not just as a personal meditation but as a coded political lament. Beneath its surface lies a critique of emotional and social repression, expressed through rhythm, metaphor, and gesture. Kagayi’s performance enacts the paradox of wanting to speak and fearing the consequences of speech, making the poem both an act of love and an act of protest.

Poets like Kagayi and others in the spoken word generation have embraced rhythm not merely as a stylistic ornament but as a foundational device that amplifies both the emotive and political force of their work. This group has even coined the term “soetry” to describe a fusion of song and poetry, a practice that distinguishes their genre from conventional page-bound verse. For example, Ugandan poet Angel Kabera, in an interview on *The Ugandan Boy Talk Show* (Episode 203), defines *soetry* as “a fusion where the melody and the music is composed to match the words,” emphasizing that it is not background music to a poem but a compositional integration of musical and poetic rhythm (Kabera 20:40–22:34). This fusion allows rhythm to move beyond mere repetition, becoming what Katharine Wilson calls a “conditioning fact in our mentality,” rooted in

both the natural world and the structure of human consciousness (Wilson 3). Kagayi's performances, particularly in emotionally charged poems like "Unofficial Metaphors" and "The Audience Must Say Amen", exemplify this. His body becomes an instrument of rhythm; his hands conducting the pace of delivery, his vocal inflections guiding the tempo, and his pauses functioning as both emotional punctuation and political tension.

This dynamic engagement of rhythm with bodily movement supports Paul Zumthor's view that rhythm in oral poetry is not only linguistic but "embodied and temporal", forming a bridge between performer and audience (Zumthor 52). Kagayi's performance at Bridgeworks ArtLab in Berlin (2022), for instance, is underscored by melancholic piano and acoustic guitar, with dancers adding kinetic texture to the spoken text. Here, rhythm is not only sonic but visual and physical, enacted through collaborative movement. In line with Patrick Suppes' view, rhythm "locks in phase with the rhythms of the brain," creating associative meaning that transcends formal structure and connects deeply with audience memory and emotion (Suppes 165). Kagayi's use of rhythm, layered, flexible, and emotionally loaded, allows him to work with both traditional oral strategies and contemporary performance aesthetics, where gesture and cadence become inseparable.

This performative emphasis on rhythm mirrors the evolution of spoken word in Uganda's poetry scene, where rhythm has become a conduit for urgency, satire, vulnerability, and protest. Rhythm, as Wilson notes, "is something that we do," rather than merely perceive (Wilson 3). For Kagayi, it is also something the audience *feels*, as he uses it to shape tension, signal irony, and carry meaning across metaphor and mood. In this regard, Kagayi and his peers are not only reclaiming African oral aesthetics but also shaping new expressive terrains where rhythm is the pulse of poetic resistance.

This innovative fusion is exemplified in Kagayi’s performance of “Because They Do Not Listen,” staged during the *Poetry Night Uganda* series in April 2025. The performance builds naturally from the preceding discussion of *soetry*, the term coined by contemporary Ugandan spoken word artists like Angel Kabera to describe a fusion of song and poetry, in which rhythm is not an accessory but an essential compositional and expressive element. This genre manifests vividly in Kagayi’s performance, where he blends Luganda and English, poetry and song, with support from live guitar, drumming, and background dancers to create a multisensory, participatory experience:

Beca...u...se they do not listen
Tebawuliriza
Beca...u...se they do not listen
Tebawuliriza
The music of the storms –
The warnings of the ozone –
Melting my poems
Into locusts flying forlorn
Clog their ears
And clay their eyes
Loaf their mouths
And pole their feet
And bread their teeth
With propaganda... (*Full* 05:30-09:16)

The refrain, “*Beca...u...se they do not listen / Tebawuliriza*”, is rhythmically stretched and repeated in both English and Luganda, reinforcing urgency and lament through vocal and bodily cadence. Kagayi’s delivery adopts reggae-inspired offbeat emphasis and spoken-word pacing that borders on rap, using syncopated phrasing and controlled breath-work to accentuate societal disconnection and institutional deafness. The phrase “bread their teeth with propaganda,” repeated like a lyric hook, recalls the call-and-response dynamics of both religious sermon and protest chant, effectively turning the audience into interlocutors in the poetic act. These rhythmic structures are not decorative; they are politically functional.

Drawing from Ruth Finnegan's insight that in African oral traditions rhythm "guides the performer, aids memory, and structures meaning" (Finnegan 126), it is evident that Kagayi uses rhythm as a tool of both resistance and cultural continuity. Each beat, repetition, and pause in this performance is tied to the message's emotional weight. Kagayi's delivery is further illuminated by Kariamuwelsh-Asante's assertion that in African expressive traditions, rhythm is "not simply sound; it is an articulation of identity and resistance" (Welsh-Asante 8). Though Welsh-Asante's focus is on dance, her theory applies here: Kagayi's gestures, sways, and modulated voice tones embody his critique, making the body a site of expression.

Moreover, Patrick Suppes reminds us that rhythm in poetry is a cognitive and emotional bridge, as the brain "phase-locks to the rhythm of the poem," creating a shared mental-emotional cadence between performer and audience (Suppes 165). This helps explain how Kagayi's use of rhythm in this poem is both a poetic and political strategy: rhythm holds the community together, even as the poem laments their fragmentation. It is rhythm that carries the sadness of neglected warnings, the fury of systemic propaganda, and the hope of eventual reckoning. Thus, "Because They Do Not Listen" exemplifies how rhythm, in its performative and political dimension, becomes a vessel for both protest and poetic power in Kagayi's "soetry".

In addition to rhythm and gesture, Kagayi's voice functions as a powerful performative tool through which he channels both personal vulnerability and collective political intensity. His vocal delivery is far from incidental; it is crafted, modulated, and often transformed to fit the emotional and political tone of each performance. As David Nowell Smith observes, voice is among the most unstable yet metaphorically rich concepts in literary studies, with applications that vary widely across disciplines. This complexity is especially relevant in spoken word, where voice is not

merely textual but corporeal, emotive, and spatially performed (Smith 1). According to K. Wales, voice is always entangled with subjectivity and perspective (Wales 437), and Kagayi exploits this by shifting from soft, confessional tones to sharp, declarative calls, often within the same piece.

This kind of vocal movement aligns closely with the insights of Thomas H. Ogden, who sees speech as a space where the self listens to itself differently than it does in thought. “Voice,” Ogden writes, “is a quality of experience... a mystery we recognize when we hear it” (Ogden 427). Kagayi's performances exemplify this mystery: his "poetic self" emerges through voice, not as a fixed identity but as one constructed, shifted, and made legible through modulated tone, emphasis, and silence. This is especially evident in performances such as “Unofficial Metaphors” or “The Audience Must Say Amen,” where his voice quivers, rises, or fades to embody the emotional charge of lines like “I fear to fear” or “They do not listen.”

As the Poetry Off the Page, Around the Globe Conference (13th – 14th June, 2025) illustrated, particularly in Carlos G. Cajaraville's analysis of Christophe Tarkos, poetic significance becomes inseparable from vocal delivery (Cajaraville). Like Tarkos, Kagayi's voice is not simply the medium of poetry; he becomes the poem. The strain in his voice, the tempo shifts, and the tonal oscillations are part of the poem's semantic architecture, turning silence, breath, and sound into formal elements of meaning.

This aligns closely with Susan Kiguli's conclusions on performativity in oral poetry. Kiguli emphasizes that performance is an active, interactive process, one that involves not only the performer but the audience, social history, and cultural memory. “The performer-audience co-interpreted and rearranged the texts... a blend of multiple voices and movements,” she writes (Kiguli 125). In this way, Kagayi's voice becomes a site of communal memory and political

commentary, its fluctuations inviting both emotional resonance and critical interrogation. Moreover, as Kiguli notes in her study of Buganda poet Kaddu Mabirizzi, the deliberate use of tone and vocal shift is a tool for poetic transformation, allowing the poet to “change from his ordinary persona to his role as performer” (Kiguli 218). Kagayi similarly alters his voice as a way of stepping into his poetic-political self, voicing both individual trauma and shared sociopolitical frustration.

Richard Schechner’s concept of “transportation” in performance also provides useful insight here. Schechner distinguishes performances that change the performer (transformations) from those that temporarily “transport” them into another realm (Schechner 125–126). Kagayi’s vocal presence suggests both: he is taken somewhere emotionally through the poem, and the audience is carried along. His voice is both his own and something more than his own, a vessel that temporarily contains the collective discontent, grief, satire, and hope of a nation that, as he repeats in “Because They Do Not Listen,” chooses silence over reckoning. Thus, voice in Kagayi’s poetry is not simply about sound. It is identity made audible, protest made musical, and vulnerability made performative.

Following Kagayi’s performative use of voice as a vessel of identity and resistance, the poem “A Clown is Seated on Our Throne” offers a noticeable progression where voice merges with satire, theatricality, and physical expression to articulate political dissent. In this performance, Kagayi moves from moderate irony to raw, emotional outcry, highlighting not just poetic play but a consequential critique of political leadership. The “clown” seated on the throne symbolizes the performer’s perception of a nation governed by farce, incompetence, and theatrical distraction, an allegory that critiques the trivialization of power in contemporary Uganda:

...And we dance at this mismatch of colours
And fight not to cry whenever we laugh
And so we burst out in this roaring applause
To reveal for his 8th straight show
The cream of the night,
The Lord of delight
The clown of Xanadu
Oh my oh my how he can play...

A Clown is seated on our throne! (*Launch* 00:27-02:34)

The symbolic inversion of a clown resonates strongly with Jack Santino's concept of the "ritualesque," where festive, playful forms are used as tools of sociopolitical transformation. Though Kagayi's performance is laced with audience laughter, rhythmic chants, and theatrical phrasing ("He he he tickles and scatters... He swags and sways... Like it's easy upon the stage"), these elements do not obscure his purpose. Rather, they intensify the underlying seriousness of intent. As Santino writes, "the carnivalesque can and does overlap with seriousness of intention... performative symbols may mask but not diminish the call for transformation" (Santino 62, 70–71). Kagayi's use of humor and spectacle, especially his imitation of the president's "rap" and the repeated call, "Have we eaten from his pot?" blurs the line between amusement and indictment. The audience initially hesitates to respond, but Kagayi's raised voice and physical insistence ultimately compels them to reply, revealing both the hesitancy and complicity embedded in public reception:

Have we eaten from his pot? (Kagayi pauses as he wants the audience to respond. When they don't, he repeats the question.)

I ask, have we eaten from his pot? (The audience answers lightly 'no' and Kagayi asks again with a raised voice)

Have we eaten from his pot? (The audience responds with a louder 'no')

Are we naked, are we not (Mixed responses from the audience with laughs) (*Launch* 01:52 – 02:09)

The interplay between festivity and political critique is grounded in performative theory. Kristin Langellier argues that voice in performance is not merely sound, but an enactment of political and personal agency, a way of speaking into being one's identity, critique, and resistance (Langellier 125–144). Kagayi's crescendo in voice, his sharp downward gestures as he states "a clown... is seated... on our throne," and his angry exit from the stage, function as what Richard Schechner calls a "transportation", a performative act where the poet is "taken somewhere," embodying the emotional, physical, and political strain of the moment (Schechner 125–126). In this final moment, the poet is not just playing a part; he becomes the frustration, the disgust, and the call to consciousness that the poem articulates. Thus, "A Clown is Seated on Our Throne" is not merely satire. It is ritualesque protest, performed in a carnivalesque register, where metaphor, voice, gesture, and audience participation are fused into a symbolic act of sociopolitical witnessing.

Building on Kristin Langellier's notion that voice in performance expresses political and personal identity, Richard Schechner expands this idea by presenting voice as a central component in the performer's toolkit, alongside gesture, rhythm, and space. Voice, Schechner asserts, is not just sound but a ritual tool, deeply embedded in culture, transformation, and role-play. "Actors use voice to shape time, convey identity, and move across registers of reality," he writes, showing how performance opens up fluid, transitional states (Schechner 170–190). In Kagayi's performance of "A Clown is Seated on Our Throne," this theory comes alive as the poet inhabits multiple personas within a single act: the satirical observer, the helpless citizen, the enraged critic, and most noticeably, the political clown.

Kagayi's strategic vocal shifts are most pronounced in moments of mimicry and political parody, particularly when he channels Uganda's president in "A Clown is Seated on Our Throne." Twice

in this performance, Kagayi's voice sharply departs from his poetic register to take on a theatrical impersonation of the president. When he declares, "You want another rap?" (Launch 01:18–01:22), the audience erupts with laughter and applause, an instinctive recognition of the phrase's cultural and political baggage. This line famously recalls the 2010 rap performed by President Museveni during his 2011 re-election campaign, in which the president asked Ugandans if they wanted "another rap," connoting both another verse and another presidential term⁸. The popular response to this question, often chanted as "*ye ssebo*" (yes sir) or "*ye Sevo*", "Sevo" being short for Museveni, became a symbol of state performance masquerading as popular appeal. This song's rapid dissemination across East Africa prompted a Kenyan newspaper to draw parallels between the artist and a renowned rapper:

"I think I can give you some rap myself now," Museveni says as he opens the song before beginning to rap in Runyankole, a tribal language in Uganda. His distinctive, gruff voice flows with the music, sounding a bit like an older, foreign, Busta Rhymes. "You want another rap?" he shouts to the beat in English. The crowd enthusiastically responds, "Ye sebo [Yes]" (Hughes).

Kagayi's reuse of this phrase is not simply comic; it is an intertextual critique. It evokes the public memory of political spectacle and seduction, exposing the performative machinery of state propaganda. His follow-up line, "Ah! Now you see... now you don't" (Launch 01:40–01:47), reinforces this sense of political illusion and deception. These lines are performed with altered pitch, exaggerated cadence, and choreographed gesture, signaling Kagayi's transformation from poet to clown to mimic. The audience, complicit and engaged, responds not just to what he says but how he says it. As a result, Kagayi's performance becomes a layered vocal theatre, where

⁸ President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, the current sitting President of Uganda has served as President since 1986. He won Uganda's first direct presidential election in May 1996. He then went on to win the next elections in March 2001, February 2006, and February 2011, the campaign that led to the production of the famous "You Want Another Rap" song that would lead him to his fourth term as President of the country.

identity, authority, and critique intersect. He is no longer simply narrating dissent; he is embodying it, using voice as a conduit for collective memory and resistance.

This interplay of vocal adaptation foregrounds a central theme in Kagayi's work: that identity is not singular or fixed, but shaped by overlapping political roles, histories, and public scripts. In this performance, Kagayi oscillates between clown and commentator, performer and citizen. His use of voice becomes a method of switching registers, not just in tone but in social identity. As Schechner notes, performers are often "transported" into roles that reveal cultural truths through symbolic action (Schechner 125–126). Kagayi's symbolic transformation into a clown, delivered vocally and physically, serves as an embodied critique of leadership, but also implicates the audience in this social theatre. Kagayi's use of voice, therefore, is deeply performative and political. It creates moments of tension and comedy, but it also activates intertextual recognition, pushing the audience to reflect on how the performance intersects with real life and how identity itself can become a theatrical space of resistance.

In "A Clown is Seated on Our Throne," Kagayi performs a ritualesque political intervention. His use of satire, repetition, and vocal parody stages a collective drama of disillusionment, where the audience becomes witness and participant in a national spectacle of deception. The ironic juxtaposition of laughter and sorrow, "we dance at this mismatch of colours and fight not to cry whenever we laugh" (00:25 – 00:35) blurs emotional boundaries, unsettling the audience's passive role. As he mimics the president's infamous campaign line, "You want another rap?", and theatrically chants, "Now you see... now you don't," Kagayi performs a layered intertextual critique that invokes media history, electoral manipulation, and mass complicity. These moments are not merely comic; they are acts of memory and resistance, signaling a refusal to forget.

The structure of the poem relies on repetition and build-up, gradually increasing emotional pressure: “We laugh, we cry, we hug, we hurray...” (01:22 – 01:27) until it explodes in the conclusive declaration, “A clown is seated on our throne.” The emotional arc of the performance rising from subtle mockery to an impassioned cry reveals the deep performative power of voice. Kagayi’s voice shifts from amused narrator, to mimic, to angry citizen, and finally to exasperated prophet who storms offstage. This vocal journey enacts the fragmentation and multiplicity of identity, particularly under authoritarian conditions where speaking truth can feel like clowning, and silence masquerades as decorum.

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity helps illuminate the political function of such vocal shifts. While Butler primarily writes on gender, she argues that voice is not a stable expression of identity, but a social act that enacts, negotiates, and reshapes identity in public space (Butler 2). In this performance, Kagayi does not present one fixed self but rather constructs multiple selves: the poet, the clown, the mimic, the citizen, each animated by a different vocal tone. His voice, therefore, does not just guide the audience’s understanding of the poem; it constitutes a public performance of self that is responsive to and shaped by Uganda’s political realities. When Kagayi throws his hand down and exits the stage in fury, he is not just ending a poem; he is ending an illusion, forcing the audience to confront the cost of applauding while their throne is being mocked. Thus, in “A Clown is Seated on Our Throne,” voice is not simply about sound or style. It is a political instrument, a medium for memory, critique, and the staging of fractured identity under regimes that demand performance from their citizens.

While Kagayi’s use of voice is central to the construction of poetic identity and political critique, it is his strategic engagement with the audience that transforms his performances into shared spaces

of meaning-making. In fact, Kagayi's vocal shifts, ranging from mimicry to emotional outburst, not only construct his multiple poetic selves but also actively draw in the audience, making them part of the performance. In "A Clown is Seated on Our Throne," this relationship is evident in the poet's use of rhetorical questions, repetition, and allusions, all of which function to elicit audience reaction. When Kagayi asks, "Have we eaten from his pot?", the question is repeated three times, escalating in urgency and tone until the audience is pressured into answering. Their hesitant laughter and eventual shout of "No!" becomes a moment of co-performance, reflecting what Kiguli refers to as the audience's role in reinterpreting and rearranging meaning during performance (125).

More than just technique, Kagayi's allusions activate shared memory and political recognition. His mimicking of the president's "rap" and magician-like antics ("Now you see... now you don't") invoke public events so well known that they require no explanation, prompting spontaneous laughter, murmurs, or applause. These moments create a dialogic space where the poet's references resonate with collective experience. According to Kiguli (2013), such performances "thrust the cultural, social, and even political questions to the center of people's experiences" (74), turning the audience into emotionally and intellectually invested participants.

Kagayi also employs figures of speech that force the audience into reflection. In lines like "We fight not to cry whenever we laugh" or "A clown is seated on our throne," metaphor, irony, and inversion work together to destabilize the obvious. The metaphor of "eating from his pot" suggests complicity and guilt, while the final declaration shifts from parody to a political indictment, catching the audience off guard. These rhetorical devices are not ornamental; they are performative

triggers that solicit response and implicate the listener, thus dissolving the line between poet and audience.

By layering voice, allusion, and other poetic devices, Kagayi's performances animate a living text that, as Kiguli describes, contains "the memories of our culture in their sounds" (Kiguli 74). His art is not simply presented *to* the audience but co-created *with* them, where every laugh, murmur, or reply is a signal that the poem is doing its political and cultural work.

This dynamic relationship between poet and audience is central to what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the "autopoietic feedback loop" of performance, where meaning is not fixed but continually generated through the interplay between performer and spectators (Fischer-Lichte 38). In Kagayi's case, each performance becomes a co-authored event, reshaped in real-time by the audience's presence and reactions. This is evident in his delivery of "A Clown is Seated on Our Throne," where Kagayi pauses after asking, "Have we eaten from his pot?" and waits for the audience to respond. When they hesitate, he repeats the line with greater intensity, raising his voice, and only then does the audience respond with a louder "No!" This interaction does more than fill silence; it reshapes the rhythm and mood of the performance, intensifying its urgency.

Later, when he mimics the president, "You want another rap?", the audience bursts into laughter and applause, prompting Kagayi to briefly break his poetic cadence to ride that laughter, allowing space for the audience's memory and recognition to swell. These spontaneous moments are not scripted; they emerge through the shared energy of performer and public. Even the poem's conclusion, "A clown is seated on our throne", lands differently depending on how the audience has engaged with the previous moments. In this performance, the line is delivered in a rising shout,

followed by Kagayi's forceful exit, and the audience reacts with a mix of nervous laughter and applause, an emotional contradiction that mirrors the political confusion being critiqued.

These instances demonstrate that no two performances are identical. Kagayi's rhythm, tone, and bodily intensity are continuously adjusted by the energy of the audience. This performative interdependency ensures that his poetry remains not only living but responsive, communal, and unrepeatable. Through this autopoietic process, performance becomes a cultural space where memory, critique, and identity are negotiated in the moment of their enactment.

In deepening our understanding of Kagayi's audience engagement, Jacques Rancière's concept of the "emancipated spectator" provides a useful theoretical lens. Rancière rejects the idea of the audience as passive recipients of meaning, arguing instead that spectators are capable of interpretation, creativity, and active meaning-making (Rancière 13). Kagayi's poetry performances actively cultivate this kind of audience agency, not only through rhetorical strategies but also through rhythm, silence, and gesture that invite participation. In "A Clown is Seated on Our Throne," Kagayi's repetition of direct questions, "Have we eaten from his pot?" and "Are we naked, are we not?", are not merely poetic flourishes; they are performative openings designed to provoke audience reflection and response (Launch 01:55–02:05). The silence that follows the first iteration of "Have we eaten from his pot?" becomes part of the poem's tension, only broken when Kagayi raises his voice and repeats the question until the audience answers. In this way, the meaning of the poem emerges not solely from the poet's voice but from the interactive tension between poet and listener.

These moments of pause and call-and-response transform the audience from witnesses into co-creators. Each reaction: laughter, murmurs, hesitation, or applause feeds into the structure and tone

of the performance, reaffirming Erika Fischer-Lichte's notion of performance as autopoietic (38). But more specifically, they affirm Rancière's belief that spectators can and do "construct their own poem" through their interpretations, associations, and emotions. Kagayi's rhetorical choices resist spoon-feeding meaning; instead, they demand that the audience think, feel, and choose whether or not to respond. This democratic structure, where power shifts between speaker and audience, mirrors the very political critique embedded in the poem. As Kagayi points to a clown on the throne, he is also pointing at the crowd, urging them to see, to speak, and to decide what role they play in this theatrical governance. In his work, the poem is not complete until it is activated through audience presence, and the audience is not passive; they are emancipated interpreters, shaping the poem as much as it shapes them.

As Marvin Carlson notes, performance is always "twice-behaved behavior". It builds on repetition, recognition, and cultural memory (Carlson 5). Kagayi's performances are steeped in this principle: they do not emerge in a vacuum, but rather rely on the audience's familiarity with the social, political, and historical subtexts embedded in the performance. He references a president's infamous campaign "rap," invokes crowd chants like "Have we eaten from his pot?" and alludes to the illusionist theatrics of state power. These moments depend on recognition; their power is realized only when the audience recalls and reacts. It is through these shared recognitions that Kagayi turns poetic performance into a communal act of remembering and interpreting. The poet cues the past, and the audience supplies the memory.

This interactivity transforms the performance into what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a dialogic exchange, a conversation in which meaning is not dictated by the performer but negotiated between performer and audience (Bakhtin 278). In Kagayi's case, the poem's political critique is never static. It is

shaped by each performance's unique social context and audience composition. At times, silence creates discomfort. At other times, audience laughter, murmurs, or applause reframe the mood of the poem. For instance, when Kagayi mimics the magician-politician, "Now you see... now you don't", his vocal delivery is theatrical, but the laughter it provokes gives the line a new layer of tragic irony. Here, the poet is not just reciting; he is in dialogue with the people, and that dialogue changes the trajectory of the performance itself.

This performer-audience interplay turns the poem into a living, evolving text, a site of political participation, where memory, recognition, and interpretation become acts of resistance. In this space, the audience is not ornamental but instrumental; they help co-produce the meaning of the poem, embodying Carlson's idea of performance as something remembered and re-performed. Kagayi's poetry exemplifies how the political poem, when staged, ceases to be a solitary reflection and becomes a collective performance of consciousness, one that compels reflection, resistance, and the radical reimagining of the present.

3.3. Performance as Power: The Disheartened Voice in *For My Negativity*

The term "disheartened" is not drawn from Kagayi's *For My Negativity*, nor is it a commentary from the poet. Rather, it is an interpretive term that describes the voice in the poem as Kagayi performs it. *For My Negativity* exemplifies poetry's capacity for embodied transformation, where the intersection of text, body, and space yields a force that transcends the page. Initially published in 2019 as seven distinct yet thematically intertwined poems, *For My Negativity* has since evolved through performance, particularly at the Uganda National Theatre in 2022 and the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) in 2023, into a living, staged protest. These performances re-contextualize the text, drawing attention to Kagayi's fluid artistic process, in which poetry is not

fixed but repeatedly reborn in performance. As Kagayi himself explained in the interview I conducted with him, “Not every poem I write is for oral performance; unless I purpose it be so... each poem, like each breath, is distinct in its formulation, functionality and subsequent execution” (Kagayi). This admission underscores the deliberate choices that shape his dual identity as both writer and performer.

Over the years, Kagayi has adopted an increasingly performative orientation in his poetic practice, one in which performance not only enlivens the written word but often becomes part of the compositional process itself. While some poems are written with the stage in mind, others evolve toward performance as the “lexical nature and environment of the metaphors and themes” (Kagayi) demand it. This adaptability reveals how Kagayi navigates the liminal space between page and stage, where the text is not merely recited but enacted, inhabited, and extended through body, voice, and audience presence. As he reflects, “In performance the poem speaks itself and it is made an embodiment of a living and functional memory... the elements of the poem perform themselves and become sensibilities of the audience” (Kagayi). In this way, *For My Negativity* becomes not just a written lament or personal confession, but a collective experience, a staged reckoning with national disillusionment. Kagayi becomes the living conduit of the message, and his performance the vessel through which political grief is translated into communal memory.

In the opening poem of the *For My Negativity* cycle, titled “*Before I Am Taxed For My Apology*,” Kagayi establishes the tone of disillusionment and defiance that runs throughout the collection. Performed at both the Uganda National Theatre and the Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR), this piece reveals how Kagayi blurs the boundaries between text and body, allowing his physical presence to become part of the poetic message. Wearing a noticeable costume: a long

white gown patched with the colours of the Ugandan flag, black, yellow, and red, visually scripting the poem's national stakes before a single word is spoken, he reflects the constrained vulnerability of the speaker who is apologizing even before being accused:

...Corruption, is a form of art,
Murder, an act, of reformation.
Everywhere, there is concealing,
Expressions become means of poisonous smiles
Concealing poisonous fangs,
Sold in headlines everyday –
Sold in restaurants everyday –
Sold in houses of prayer everyday –
Sold in classrooms every day.

We are the food prepared
In this political polythene bag (Laughs)
Served to feed The democracy cancer,
From God's chosen ones,
And God's forsaken ones,
We are all feeding from the same pot
Of the secret ballot-box,
We line up behind to vote... (*MISR* 01:08:45-01:07:42)

Each phrase Kagayi utters in this performance is tightly coupled with deliberate bodily action, moments of purposeful stillness, and gestures that channel blame, not merely toward corrupt individuals, but toward a complicit society that allows injustice to fester. The blame is collective, and Kagayi performs it as such. In one of the most noticeable segments of the performance at MISR, he declares with chilling composure: "Corruption is a form of art. Murder, an act of reformation" (*MISR* 00:18–00:31). Each clause is followed by a weighted pause, during which Kagayi surveys the audience with a cold, disillusioned gaze, not accusatory, but exhausted, as though searching for someone brave enough to disagree.

As he continues, "Everywhere there is concealing... expressions become means of poisonous smiles", Kagayi lifts a black cloth and covers his face, using it not simply as a costume, but as a

symbolic veil of state deception. The cloth becomes both mask and metaphor, rendering him faceless, just as the “poisonous fangs” of corruption are hidden beneath public displays of civility. The “blame” in this moment is bodily performed, through the covering of the self, Kagayi dramatizes how corruption operates not in plain sight but behind headlines, pulpits, and classrooms. The gesture is neither theatrical excess nor abstraction; it is a physical indictment of political hypocrisy.

The audience’s reaction here is telling. Unlike the moments of laughter in “A Clown is Seated on Our Throne”, this segment is met with deep, painful silence. The stillness is not apathy but absorption, suggesting that the performance has shifted from provocation to communal reckoning. As Kagayi paces the stage, his voice rises at this point: “We are the food prepared in this political polythene bag”. A few muted laughs break out, more in discomfort than humor. By the time he reaches “We are all feeding from the same pot...”, the room has grown heavy with unease.

In this performance, Kagayi does not merely speak about corruption; he embodies its emotional and psychological effects. His costume, movement, voice, and silence work together to expose the grotesque normalcy of political decay, while drawing the audience into the ethical burden of spectatorship. The audience, rendered almost voiceless, mirrors the very society the poem critiques: wounded, watching, but not yet resisting.

All the gestures Kagayi performs in “Before I Am Taxed for My Apology” are integral to the poem’s message, turning his body into a living text. This resonates with Richard Schechner’s assertion that performance reworks familiar actions, gestures, rituals, and silences to tap into collective memory and convey meaning beyond words (Schechner 38). When Kagayi covers his face with the black cloth while declaring, “Everywhere, there is concealing”, the act is not just a

metaphor; it is embodied indictment. His body, veiled and withdrawn, performs the same concealment he condemns, drawing attention to how public life is staged through selective visibility and masked violence.

Later, as he paces slowly and then pauses after delivering the lines, “We are the food prepared in this political polythene bag... served to feed the democracy cancer”, Kagayi’s sarcastic laughing and hopping around the stage becomes a visual mark. In that moment, his body is filled with emotional overwhelm, and the audience, still quite silent, mirrors the very paralysis the poem laments. It is a noticeable visual metaphor: the performer echoes the helplessness many Ugandans experience in confronting political dysfunction as he hops and laughs at the mention of something serious. This becomes a charged space of reflection, inviting the audience to not only watch but to see themselves, their fears, complicity, and fatigue, performed before them. In this way, Kagayi’s body is symbolically saturated, functioning as a mirror held up to a society that often chooses silence over dissent. His pauses, hops, and laughter are filled with meaning, creating a tension between urgency and resignation. The gestures and silences thus do what the words alone cannot: they allow the poem to live in the space between language and flesh, between performer and spectator.

Equally central to the performance of *For My Negativity* is the function of orality, not merely as the act of speaking, but as a performance of presence, power, and resistance. Orality here is not just a mode of delivery, but a cultural tool through which the poet connects with, challenges, and implicates his audience. Drawing on Walter J. Ong’s reminder that orality fosters participation, involvement, and responsiveness, Kagayi constructs a performance that demands emotional investment and social consciousness from those who bear witness (Ong 9). Through shifting tone,

volume, rhythm, and gesture, he creates a voice that is not his alone, but a collective cry rooted in shared frustration and national pain. In the performance of “Before I Am Taxed for My Apology,” Kagayi utilizes his voice in careful gradations, alternating between whispered introspection and fierce public confrontation. A powerful example occurs as he transitions from a subdued, near-whisper into the explosive line: “Sold in classrooms every day” (MISR 01:20–01:27). At this moment, he throws the black gown across the stage, a dramatic rejection of the symbolic concealment that has been haunting the performance up to this point. The action signifies a break from silence, a refusal to remain complicit in the normalization of corruption, especially within institutions like schools, once imagined as sites of integrity. The black cloth, once veiling his face in concealment, is now discarded with force, turning it into a symbol of defiance.

Interestingly, the audience remains silent even here. This silence, however, is not indifference; it is stunned recognition. Their stillness is a form of listening made visible, marking a shift from passive observation to internal reckoning. As Ong argues, orality shakes the comfort of spectatorship by compelling listeners into affective and cognitive response, even when that response is wordless (9). In this moment, Kagayi’s shifting vocal register transforms the performance into a dialogue not just with the audience, but with the poem itself. It becomes a form of lived resistance, where each utterance is a challenge to power, and each pause a dare for the listener to fill with their own truth.

Furthermore, Kagayi’s rhythm, expressed both through voice and deliberate physical pacing, infuses *For My Negativity* with emotional and psychological complexity. The performance becomes breath-driven, embodied in a tempo that synchronizes pain, hesitation, and effort. At the Uganda National Theatre performance of “Before I Am Taxed for My Apology,” Kagayi enters

the stage carrying a large box painted with the British national flag, hoisted above his head. His steps are short, heavy, and staggered, suggesting the immense weight of what he bears. The box is not just a prop; it symbolizes the burden of colonial inheritance, still pressing down on the contemporary Ugandan psyche. Meanwhile, the stage is set with clothes hanging on a line, evoking the domestic and intimate space of the everyday, contrasted with the abstract political pressures embodied by the box.

Clad in his signature white gown patched with the Ugandan flag's colours: black, yellow, and red, Kagayi staggers toward the center of the stage while he performs:

I am sorry for how I feel about my country,
I am sorry for my negativity.
I am sorry if I upset
Any stars in the skies of our optimism
With unpleasant feelings my poems emit. (*Negativity* 02:30-03:10)

Here, rhythm becomes both visual and vocal. His feet lift in a stuttering, reluctant motion, as though his body is caught between movement and paralysis. This paradox, moving but going nowhere, visually conveys the internal tension between expression and repression, between wanting to critique and fearing the cost of doing so. The apology at the poem's opening is delivered with a quiet, mournful tone, more restrained than theatrical. His words drip with irony: the "stars in the skies of our optimism" may symbolize state propaganda, national myths, or even well-meaning patriots who cannot bear dissent. The image of his poems emitting unpleasant feelings implies that poetry itself becomes suspect when it tells the uncomfortable truth.

By juxtaposing the strained physical entry, the colonial symbolism of the flag box, and the tonal apology, Kagayi stages the emotional dissonance of being a patriotic dissenter. His actions turn the performance into a living metaphor for psychological and cultural weight, a protest carried not

through shouting or accusation, but through burdened breath, haunted rhythm, and a conflicted voice. In doing so, he performs the tension of speaking out in a country still wrestling with historical and political shadows.

After placing down the box on his head, Kagayi moves around it in tight circles, as if trapped by his own thoughts:

...From what my eyes see,
What my nose whiffs,
What my ears hear,
What my feet feel... (*Negativity* 03: 17-03:45)

He then steps forward with a kind of calculated determination:

...To skew into my skin,
The things my mouth speaks,
For these unpleasant feelings
Are the many, many, many
Unsettled spirits in our midst, Craving to state their case
On why they, and therefore we,
Are not yet eternally at rest. (*Negativity* 03:45-04:33)

The movements around the box and then stepping forward towards the audience serve not only as spatial expressions but also as metaphors for inner turmoil. The breath, which often escapes him in sharp bursts and deep exhalations, becomes part of the performance's grammar. As previously noted, Fischer-Lichte describes this phenomenon as an "autopoietic feedback loop", where the performer's body and breath interact with the audience's reactions to create a living, evolving event (39). Through this physical pacing and voice, Kagayi breathes truth to power, portraying poetry as a living art through his negativity expressed in the poem.

The performance of *For My Negativity* reveals that voice in orature is not a singular, stable instrument, but rather a multi-dimensional tool of expression and resistance. In this performance cycle, Kagayi moves between sarcasm, sorrow, irony, and rage, not only through words but

through how he sounds. At moments, his voice drops to a near whisper, especially when he offers truths like, “Sold in headlines every day –/ Sold in restaurants every day –/ Sold in houses of prayer every day –”, delivered in a tone of heavy remorse. But in the next line, this tone turns sharp and ironic, such as when he proclaims, “Sold in classrooms every day”, his voice rising into a harsh, almost accusatory shout (MISR 01:00–01:27). Even in “We are the food prepared in this political polythene bag”, the rhythm of his voice mimics the absurdity of the metaphor, edging toward sarcasm while still retaining a tone of pain.

These tonal shifts are not merely emotional outbursts; they transform the poem into a layered, living text. The irony of apologizing for telling the truth, the rage buried in the confession, and the quiet sorrow in his slower lines give the performance its emotional depth and political complexity. Kagayi is accusing power, confessing complicity, and convicting the audience to reflect on their silence.

This aligns with what Patrice Pavis calls the “total signifying system” of performance; the idea that sound, silence, tone, and gesture together create meaning far beyond the literal words spoken (Pavis 126). Kagayi’s voice, in this sense, becomes a multi-layered instrument that performs meaning on emotional, political, and cultural registers. Even his pauses, like when he stops after invoking “poisonous smiles” or after discarding the black cloth, are charged with tension, inviting the audience to inhabit the space between words, where truth often hides. These silences are as meaningful as his speech; they are the breath of suppressed voices, the ache of collective memory, and the weight of a nation’s stifled dissent.

Intonation becomes a kind of emotional subtext in Kagayi’s performance of the poem, breathing life into the written word and translating thought into palpable feeling. His rise and fall in pitch,

before quickened breath, and strategic elongation of syllables are not mere vocal flourishes but are integral parts of a larger performance economy that communicates despair, sarcasm, defiance, and longing. When Kagayi lowers his voice to whisper, intoning lines such as “pasted on billboards every day / Sold in headlines every day / Sold in houses of prayer every day / Sold in restaurants every day” (*Negativity* 06:34-07:01), the soft delivery is heavy with resignation, as though the omnipresence of commodified suffering has numbed the voice itself.

The whisper wraps around the audience like a shaved secret, pulling them into the suffocating intimacy of everyday betrayal. The audience remains silent here. Then, as if unable to contain the accumulated grief, Kagayi’s voice rises sharply, “We are the food prepared / In this political polythene bag / Served to feed the democratic cancer / For God’s chosen ones / And God’s forsaken ones” (*Negativity* 07:02-07:39). Here, the tonal shift is abrupt and jarring, a sonic rapture that mirrors the violent betrayal he speaks of. Fischer-Lichte argues that such vocal registers can produce a “bodily resonance” in the listener, triggering shared affective experiences (89). Indeed, watching Kagayi perform *For My Negativity*, one does not merely understand the poem intellectually; one feels it. His voice does not just narrate injustice; it embodies it, transmitting it viscerally into the listeners’ bodies.

Kagayi’s performance intricately explores the body as a site of meaning, with the mouth emerging as a particularly potent symbol. Rather than a mere vehicle for speech, Kagayi’s mouth becomes a space for tension: He uses it to control when he raises or lowers his voice, when he sings, creates rhythm, utters uncomfortable truths, or when he mimics; “This land belongs to Queen Elizabeth” (*Negativity* 05:00-05:05). This act, in Judith Butler’s terms, can be seen as a form of “performative citationality”, where identity and resistance are continually forged through repeated, embodied

acts of language (Butler 15). Kagayi's manipulation of the mouth thus stages the broader social struggle for voice in a society that often enforces silence. Complementing this is his use of improvisation, which reminds us that performance is a living, breathing art form. He occasionally inserts spontaneous remarks, picks out unexpected props from his box, compels his audience to respond or shifts the delivery slightly, making each performance unique and immediate.

These moments align with Fischer-Lichte's understanding of performance not as a fixed artifact but as an evolving "event" co-created between performer and audience (Fischer-Lichte 35). They show Kagayi's refusal to be imprisoned by the script and for this reason, his poetry lives because it listens, adapts, and redefines itself in the present moment. Moreover, the breath itself becomes a crucial poetic device in his performance. It does more than sustain speech; it sculpts meaning. Extended pauses invite reflection; sharp gasps embody moments of emotional rapture; measured breathing gives form to stanzas. In the deep traditions of African oral literature, breath is sacred as it carries spirit, word, and life. Kagayi's sensitive modulation of breath places him firmly within his lineage, emphasizing that for him, poetry is not simply a verbal craft but a deeply spiritual, emotional, and corporeal experience.

Finally, Kagayi's spatial awareness on stage becomes a vital extension of the poem's internal tensions, turning movement into metaphor. At the center of the stage, he places the box painted with the English flag which is a noticeable symbol of colonial inheritance and ongoing entanglement. Throughout the performance, Kagayi's relationship with this box structures his movement: he orbits around it, retreats to it, withdraws props from it, and returns to the audience. Every step he takes; away from the audience, back toward them, then back to the box, enacts a physical conversation between past and present, memory and confrontation. His movement is deliberate, almost ritualistic, suggesting the persistent gravity of colonial residues that still anchor

the present. Bert O. States’ notion of “phenomenological layering”, where spatial choices materialize psychological realities, becomes visible here (States 72). The box is not simply a container for props; it becomes a repository of contested memory, a colonial relic that Kagayi both depends upon and seeks to transcend.

In the performance’s final moments, Kagayi lifts the box above his head, just as he did at the beginning, but now, he dances a vibrant cultural dance while singing in Lusoga, one of the languages spoken by people in the eastern part of Uganda, moving freely around the stage and then off it. In doing so, he draws on characteristics of oral performance, as the audience actively participates in this final act by responding:

Mbombombo (mbotimbo)	Mboleera
Mbombombo (mbotimbo)	Mboleera
Ng’olinamanha (mbombo)	Mboleera
Tyakaidye (mbombo)	Mboleera
Okubakobera (mbombo)	Mboleera
Ekikakyange (mbombo)	Mboleera
Ekyabbaabba (mbombo)	Mboleera
Mu IseMukose (mbombo)	Mboleera
Ekyammaamma (mbombo)	Mboleera
Mu IseNgobi (mbombo)	Mboleera
Mbombombo (mbotimbo)	Mboleera
Mbombombo (mbotimbo)	Mboleera (<i>Negativity</i> 01:04:50-01:16:21)

This occurs during a section of his performance, “Why am I Telling You This in English?” Kagayi’s transition to singing in Lusoga is initially hesitant, as if an invisible force constrains his linguistic expression. He displays this by trying to speak the language, but whenever he tried to create the rhythm, “mbombo”, he would cough like this force could not let him express himself in Lusoga. However, he eventually transcends this barrier, embracing the rhythm and cadence of his

native language. This breakthrough is marked by a captivating performance, showcasing his artistic mastery of Lusoga rhythm and dance. The initial struggle suggests a complex relationship between language, identity, and artistic expression. Kagayi's eventual liberation allows him to connect with his audience on a deeper level, highlighting the significance of cultural heritage in his performance. This particular part of the performance thus feels like a deliberate rapture: a reclamation of identity, a sonic and bodily reminder of what colonial histories tried to erase. The stage, once a site of struggle, becomes a shifting terrain of memory, confrontation, and finally, self-reconstruction. Kagayi's choreography mirrors the poem's emotional arc, suggesting that resistance is not only spoken in the colonial tongue but also danced, sung, and lived in the rhythms of indigenous memory.

3.4. Decolonizing the Voice at John Speke High School (*No Speaking Vernacular*)

My personal experiences in primary and secondary education in Uganda resonate fundamentally with the themes presented in Kagayi's performance, *No Speaking Vernacular*. The punitive measures enforced in schools to suppress the use of indigenous languages evoke a complex interplay of power, identity, and cultural heritage. The practice of assigning a "vernacular speaker" chart to students, which compelled them to monitor and report peers for speaking native languages, exemplifies the systemic efforts to marginalize local languages and cultures. This experience, initially perceived as a trivial aspect of school life, takes on a more sinister tone upon reflection. The forced adoption of a foreign language, coupled with punishment for speaking one's native tongue, constitutes a form of cultural erasure. Children were not only penalized for linguistic expression but also coerced into adopting a language that often posed significant challenges for them.

Kagayi's performance resonates with the ideas of decolonial thinkers like Ngũgĩ, who posits that language is inextricably linked to culture, memory, and identity. The imposition of colonial languages serves as a mechanism to disrupt indigenous cultures and control consciousness (Ngũgĩ 16). This perspective underscores the significance of linguistic decolonization and the reclaiming of native languages as a means of reasserting cultural identity. By situating Kagayi's work within the framework of decolonial thought, it becomes evident that his performance transcends mere artistic expression. His decision to adopt the name "Ngobi" in place of "Peter" mirrors Ngũgĩ's rejection of his colonial name, "James," and symbolizes a deliberate attempt to reclaim and reconnect with his cultural heritage. This act of renaming can be seen as a powerful gesture of resistance against linguistic imperialism and a testament to the enduring importance of indigenous languages and cultures. This section explores how Kagayi's performance of *No Speaking Vernacular* becomes a theatrical act of resistance, reclaiming the right to speak, to name, and to belong in one's own language. Kagayi has also spoken about this resistance in some recorded interviews.

The poem *No Speaking Vernacular* was written down first, then dramatized in several performances. In this poem, Kagayi stages a powerful protest against the silencing of indigenous languages within Uganda's formal education system. His performance reawakens the ghosts of colonialism that continue to haunt classrooms where English is exalted and local languages are criminalized. The poem dramatizes a real and recurring experience of students punished not for being unruly, but for speaking their own mother tongue. In this dramatized moment, Kagayi does not merely perform a poem; he embodies the contradiction of being Ugandan in an education system that rewards linguistic mimicry over cultural authenticity. By using the performative tools, intonation, gesture, space, and repetition, Kagayi exposes how colonial ideologies remain

embedded in everyday practices like language enforcement and how these practices shape identities and enforce silence.

The performance of this poem begins with a noticeable reference point for Ugandans in the name of the school Kagayi chooses for this performance: John Speke High School (*Vernacular* 02:00-02:02). This name alludes to the historical figure John Hanning Speke, a European explorer credited with “discovering” Lake Victoria as the Nile’s source, thereby paving the way for colonialism in Uganda. However, as Samwiri Lwanga-Luyiingo notes, such “discoveries” overlooked existing African knowledge systems, serving instead to further European imperial interests in the region (Lwanga-Luyiingo 45). This context underscores the complex dynamics of colonial legacy and cultural identity that Kagayi explores. In *No Speaking Vernacular*, Kagayi confronts one of the most deeply entrenched legacies of colonialism in Uganda: linguistic repression.

...Gweeeee!

Dambya?

Water! Water! Sendi me zaati tawelo.

Didi you just speaki vernacular?

Sendi me zaati tawelo, my eyes, water.

Anhaa! It’s you.

Yes, sir?

Today you are not escaping me,

Today I have caught you with my own ears,

Today no denying, No? Today no? (Denying).

Today I caught you.

Do you have the list of language sinners?... (*Vernacular* 07:17-08:02)

In this scene from “*No Speaking Vernacular*,” Kagayi dramatizes an encounter between a student who is late for class, Dambya, and a school prefect enforcing a rigid language policy. Dambya is in the middle of bathing, with soap stinging his eyes, when the prefect confronts him and pressures

him to hurry. As Dambya pleads for water, his voice distressed and his eyes burning, he instinctively exclaims in Luganda, violating the school's strict English-only rule.

The poem dramatizes a familiar yet unsettling experience in Ugandan schools: Dambya (a student) is punished for speaking Luganda, even if only a word, while being forced to speak English, no matter how broken or unmastered it is, for both himself and the timekeeper who is disgusted by Dambya's utterance of the word 'gwe'. The school's headmaster, known to students as Mr. Full stop (a character performed by Kagayi), exacerbates the situation by characterizing the use of vernacular language as a sin, thereby further stigmatizing students' native tongues. This is not just a linguistic policy; it is a violent performance of erasure. Kagayi's staged resistance, performed with deliberate embodiment, tonal shifts, and a commanding stage presence, becomes a political and artistic reclamation of the right to speak in one's own tongue. Here, the performance is not merely a recital of words but a living struggle against the lingering colonial imaginary that equates English with intelligence, order, and value.

From a performance theory perspective, Kagayi turns the stage into a contested classroom where the voice of the colonized refuses to be silenced. Drawing on J.L. Austin's theory of the performative, this poem functions not only as an artistic expression but as a speech act; an intervention in real discursive structures (Austin 52). Judith Butler's insights further support this reading; Kagayi's embodied resistance works to "reiterate" and simultaneously disrupt the norms of linguistic power (Butler 14). The repetition of colonial disciplinary structures such as the rule "No speaking vernacular!" reflected in their new school anthem (*Vernacular* 26:32 – 28:23) is subverted through ironic delivery, exaggerated accent, and a conscious reclaiming of Luganda as legitimate speech. He stages what Butler would call a "politically consequential performative act"

(Butler 15), one that resists the gendered and racialized scripts of compliance inherited from colonial schooling.

Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's decolonial lens helps deepen this understanding. His concept of the “coloniality of being” and “coloniality of knowledge” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 13) is central to interpreting this poem's deeper political urgency. The student's punishment for speaking Luganda is not an isolated disciplinary event; it is a manifestation of coloniality, a system that continues to frame African ways of knowing and being as inferior. In Kagayi's performance, the body becomes a site of both repression and resistance. The performers do not just tell a story; they relive the pain of being told that their languages, and by extension, their identity, are unacceptable.

Moreover, the school setting in the poem operates as what Ngũgĩ calls a “linguistic prison” (Ngũgĩ 16). The classroom is no longer a neutral space of learning but a site of ideological warfare. Kagayi, through performance, ruptures this space, drawing the audience into a collective recognition of violence that was, and still is, normalized in African education. The punishment of Dambya in the poem, for merely being linguistically authentic, reveals how colonial power inscribes itself on bodies and tongues. And yet, Kagayi's choice to perform this repression as absurd, as cruel, and as familiar, becomes a form of healing. It is a form of truth-telling, not through theory alone, but through the breath, voice, and presence of a poet standing in his own language.

Kagayi's performance is not solely about language; it is also about who is allowed to be visible and heard in the public sphere. When the performers play the teacher and the students, exaggerate punishment, or walk across the stage with calculated defiance, they are not only recreating a memory but resisting a structure. The staging of bodily control, the slaps, the fear, and the public humiliation capture the disciplinary logic embedded in colonial education. These acts mirror Michel Foucault's idea of the “docile body”, one shaped and regulated through subtle systems of

control (Foucault 138). However, unlike the passive docility of the colonized student, Kagayi's performative re-enactment transforms docility into defiance. He uses his body as an archive of suppressed stories, turning performance into testimony.

Crucially, Kagayi's audience becomes part of this political theatre. Performance, as Richard Schechner argues, is not a one-way communication but a shared space of negotiation and recognition (Schechner 80). The performance actively involves the audience throughout. Notably, Kagayi's character, the headmaster, engages the audience in two key moments:

1. During a staff meeting, Kagayi invites audience members to participate, designating them as teachers (*Vernacular* 33:24-39:16).
2. When distributing examination results, Kagayi calls out names, and audience members come forward to collect their scripts, momentarily becoming students (*Vernacular* 39:38-41:09).

By blurring the lines between performer and audience, Kagayi creates an immersive experience. The laughter, gasps, or murmurs from the audience during *No Speaking Vernacular* are not interruptions; they are integral to the message. Kagayi invites his audience to re-live what many have endured: the shame of being corrected for sounding too African, the embarrassment of a classmate beaten for not "speaking well." This interaction produces what Victor Turner termed "communitas", a temporary but powerful social bond that emerges in ritual-like performance (Turner 131). In this moment, poetry ceases to be a solitary expression; it becomes a communal catharsis.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's framing of epistemic disobedience provides further insight into this performance. The act of speaking Luganda on stage, proudly and rhythmically, defies what he calls the "coloniality of knowledge", a system that legitimizes only European epistemologies and languages as authoritative (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 19). Kagayi's performance, therefore, is not just

reclaiming speech; it is reclaiming knowledge. He reminds the audience that orature is not a primitive form of communication but a rich, embodied system of knowing and remembering.

Twajjatulimbuzi
Kati tugunjuse
Abazadde mwebale
Okutuwelera... (*Vernacular* 51:08-53:03)

The act of fetching his parents becomes an opportunity for interaction. Before selecting an audience member as a guardian, Dambya's character shares a moment with the audience, further dissolving the boundary between performer and audience. Each word in Luganda becomes an act of decolonial resistance, challenging the assumption that legitimacy comes through English alone.

One of the most noticeable features of *No Speaking Vernacular* is how Kagayi flips the script on shame. The student in the poem is made to feel ashamed for using his mother tongue, yet Kagayi turns that shame into satire. Through exaggeration, repetition, and mimicry, he exposes the absurdity of punishing a child for speaking naturally. This strategy echoes what Ngũgĩ calls the "language of struggle" (Ngũgĩ 20), where the act of speaking itself becomes a battlefield. Kagayi not only performs resistance; he performs pride. In so doing, he offers the audience a reimagined reality where African languages are celebrated rather than suppressed.

Furthermore, Kagayi's performance can be read as a refusal to remain within the "linguistic skin" of the colonizer. In his essay *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ emphasizes that language carries culture, values, and identity (Ngũgĩ 4). When African students are punished for using their home languages, they are not just being corrected. They are being told to abandon their cultural essence. Dambya's poetic body, standing firm and speaking Luganda, contradicts that erasure. His body is not just a vessel of protest; it is a home for cultural memory. In this sense, the classroom becomes not only a space of repression but also a site of potential recovery, where the re-enacted trauma

can be transformed into a liberating ritual. When Kagayi performs, he is not simply recreating a moment of shame; he is also reshaping it into a moment of clarity and collective awareness.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter sought to interrogate Kagayi's performed poetry as a dynamic instance of performative text and living art. Through close engagement with selected poems, particularly those available via platforms such as YouTube, this chapter has illuminated the distinctive characteristics of Kagayi's performance aesthetics, highlighting how his poetic practice transcends mere recitation to become a vibrant act of resistance and communal engagement. His fervent commitment to performance, evident in extended renditions like *For My Negativity* at the Uganda National Theatre and MISR, as well as *No Speaking Vernacular*, foregrounds his thematic concerns with language, identity, and socio-political critique. Drawing on the chapter's epigraph from Jean "Binta" Breeze, the analysis underscores how poetry's essence lies in the strategic deployment of language as a tool for contestation and expression, an idea vividly enacted in Kagayi's embodied performances.

Central to Kagayi's artistry are his sustained use of repetition, allusion, and rhetorical questioning, which generate and sustain a powerful performative momentum. This momentum is further charged by his incisive blend of sarcasm and audible anger, which amplify his critique of the socio-cultural and political dysfunctions permeating Ugandan society. By transforming his body and voice into sites of resistance, Kagayi challenges colonial legacies and contemporary inequalities, reclaiming language and identity through the performative act.

Building on the foundational arguments presented in Chapter One, which situated Kagayi within a lineage of contemporary African spoken word poets, this chapter has advanced that discussion

by critically examining the mechanics and artistry of his performed poetry. It has been demonstrated that Kagayi's poetic practice, even in its written form, inherently demands enactment and performative interpretation, thus bridging the boundaries between written and oral traditions. This critical insight sets the stage for further exploration in the next chapter, which will delve deeper into the written manifestations of Kagayi's poetry.

CHAPTER FOUR

CRAFTING MEANING IN KAGAYI NGOBI'S WRITTEN POETRY: A UGANDAN AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVE

Writing is not just about what you want to say. And it's not even about teaching people but it's about opening up spaces and possibilities and opportunities for people to think beyond just what they see. For people to be able to enlarge their minds. To launch their minds into spaces that are denied to them, OR into spaces they cannot access. And so I think that's where writing and speaking become very important.

—Susan N. Kiguli, quoted by African Writers Trust, X (formerly *Twitter*), 26 Sept. 2022

4.0. Introduction

This chapter shifts focus from Kagayi's performed poetry to an in-depth examination of his written work against the background of the fluidity of his poetic practice of sometimes writing down work he first performs or performing work he first writes down. It explores the distinctive characteristics of his written poetry and their contribution to the overall meaning of his oeuvre. I am alert to the performative nature of many of his poems; however, analyzing Kagayi's written poetry is crucial, as it plays a significant role in shaping the meaning of his work. In a podcast interview, "Ugandan Art Speaks Out," Kagayi reflects on his early days as a poet. He recounts his initial attempt at writing a sonnet, inspired by William Shakespeare, which he ultimately disliked (*Stage* 01:50-02:40). This anecdote highlights Kagayi's evolution as a poet and his development of a unique writing style distinct from but also bearing traces of his early influences. This chapter investigates the outstanding features of Kagayi's written poetry, emphasizing the most noticeable, memorable, or important elements that define his selected work. Furthermore, the chapter uses a textual analytical approach that contextualizes his poetry within the framework of Ugandan cultural, experiential, and artistic paradigms.

This chapter, therefore, is a combination of linguistic, cultural, oral, and postcolonial perspectives, and its central claim is to examine the dominant stylistic features of Kagayi's written poetry and their role in shaping his socio-cultural and political perceptions. The poems being analysed in this chapter are eleven: "Why Am I Telling You This In English", "Yellow Pupu", "Manvuuli Kampala Busa Butwa", "Bano Abasaadha", "These People! These People!", *No Speaking Vernacular!*, "A Family Portrait", "I Want To Write A Poem", "Listening to Poetry", "Give Me Yellow Blood", and "Do You Know Where I'm From?". These poems are selected from the many poems of Kagayi, because I feel they best reveal the central claim of this chapter, and they also stand out as the best poems with which to discuss the poet's socio-cultural and political perceptions, through the dominant stylistic features they possess.

4.1. Language as Decolonial Strategy: Diction, Local Language, and Resistance

One of the most remarkable features of Kagayi's written poetry is his strategic use of language as a tool for decolonial resistance. As previously discussed in relation to his performance poetry, the final piece in his show *For My Negativity* is particularly illuminating: after predominantly speaking in English throughout the performance, Kagayi pauses to ask, "Why am I telling you this in English?" before concluding in Lusoga, accompanied by a traditional dance that invigorates the audience. This deliberate shift signals a conscious engagement with decoloniality, aligning with Ndlovu-Gatsheni's assertion that decolonial thinking entails rejecting dominant Western epistemologies in favour of epistemic alternatives rooted in the Global South (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 42). Kagayi's written poetry reflects this ethos through his intentional use of *local language*, *code-switching*, allusion, and a blend of simple and elevated diction that challenges linguistic hierarchies inherited from colonial education systems.

In particular, code-switching operates as a crucial rhetorical and ideological device in Kagayi's poetry. As Lawrie Barnes observes in the context of South African poetry, code-switching serves multiple functions: it marks contrast, adds local colour, underscores political commentary, and foregrounds identity and solidarity (Barnes 82). By embedding vernacular expressions within English matrices, poets reclaim the linguistic spaces marginalized by colonial education and assert the legitimacy of indigenous epistemologies. For Kagayi, such alternation between English and Lusoga disrupts the unmarked colonial code and asserts a "marked" African linguistic presence that resonates with his audience's lived experience. Through this practice, he constructs meaning that is inseparable from his cultural identity and performs a symbolic act of resistance against linguistic domination. This aligns with the Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton 1998), which posits that shifts from an unmarked to a marked code signal a deliberate renegotiation of identity and power relations. In Kagayi's poetry, the switch to Lusoga is thus not ornamental but decolonial. It enacts a reclamation of suppressed voices and challenges the epistemic privilege of English as the sole bearer of literary value.

In doing so, Kagayi not only involves his audience in the act of performance but also invites his readers to reflect critically, echoing the spirit of the epigraph that opens this chapter, which calls for a reclamation of silenced voices and a reawakening of indigenous consciousness. The epigraph's spirit foregrounds the urgency of dismantling epistemic hierarchies and reclaiming intellectual spaces that colonial structures have historically denied African subjects. Kagayi's poetic language responds directly to this call by transforming the act of speaking vernaculars into a form of intellectual assertion.

When transposed into written form, this performative gesture acquires new significance. In his published collections such as *The Headline That Morning and Other Poems*, Kagayi sustains this decolonial impulse through deliberate inclusion of Lusoga expressions, proverbial idioms, and local imagery that resist translation. The written poem becomes a textual site where orality and print converge, allowing the reader to witness the same epistemic defiance that animates his live performances. Thus, the page itself becomes a performance arena in which Kagayi inscribes the rhythms, tonalities, and linguistic hybridity of Ugandan experience. By embedding vernacular codes in print, Kagayi transforms his texts into enduring acts of resistance, ensuring that the written word continues the performative work of unsettling colonial language hierarchies. His poetic choices, therefore, embody decolonial thought not only in performance but also within the materiality of the text, encouraging readers to engage critically with questions of language, identity, and power.

In the poem referenced above, “Why am I telling you this in English?”, Kagayi offers a clear articulation of his decolonial stance through his strategic use of language, shifting from Lusoga to English and then back to Lusoga. This movement is highly significant because it symbolically enacts the tension between colonial linguistic imposition and indigenous linguistic reclamation. Ngũgĩ reminds us that language is not merely a tool for communication but a carrier of culture and worldview; the suppression of African languages and elevation of English in colonial education systems alienated Africans from their heritage and distorted their self-perception (Ngũgĩ 13). By deliberately shifting between English and Lusoga, Kagayi dramatizes this alienation and models a conscious act of resistance, one that rejects the notion of English as the exclusive medium of intellectual expression and restores Lusoga to its rightful epistemic space.

Kagayi's frustration emerges from the continued dominance of English as Uganda's official language, a legacy that Ngũgĩ critiques as the "magic formula to colonial elitedom" (Ngũgĩ 13). This privileging of English perpetuates a hierarchy where success and intelligence are measured through a foreign tongue, marginalizing indigenous languages and the knowledge systems they carry. In echoing Ngũgĩ's call in *Decolonising the Mind* and *Moving the Centre* for a return to African languages as vehicles of cultural rebirth, Kagayi positions himself as both a decolonial thinker and poet. His linguistic choices reflect a deep concern that the continued privileging of English risks eroding Uganda's cultural heritage, stifling political agency, and curbing intellectual creativity. The shifts within the poem thus function as both aesthetic strategies and political gestures, foregrounding the necessity of reclaiming indigenous languages as legitimate sites of knowledge and expression:

But why am I telling you this in English?

To say,
I recognize my negativity
From as far as,
'Baaba black sheep have you any wool?'
'A for Apple, B for Ball'
'One plus one, equals two.'

The days have aged
But nothing changes;
Fanon is still a foreigner here.

The Constitution,
Our National Law,
Is official in English!

Yet the winds
'On the beach, on the coast,'
In my ears they blow;

*'C'mon! Accept English,
You grew up with it' ... ("Why" 41)*

The speaker's childhood reminiscences, "Baaba black sheep...", "A for Apple, B for Ball", "One plus one equals two", operate as compressed signifiers of colonial socialization. They are not innocent rhymes but the first lessons in an education system that taught Ugandan children to conceptualize the world through a foreign tongue. By invoking these fragments, Kagayi condenses a history of cultural displacement into a few deceptively simple lines. Ngũgĩ observes that colonial education "annihilated a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle" (16). These early rhymes symbolize the beginning of that linguistic alienation, where English becomes the language of authority and intellectual legitimacy.

The line "Fanon is still a foreigner here" deepens the poem's reflective intensity. It alludes to Frantz Fanon's critique of colonial subjectivity, particularly his argument in *Black Skin, White Masks* that colonized individuals internalize inferiority through imposed language and culture (Fanon 18-25). By suggesting that "Fanon is still a foreigner," Kagayi implies that even the revolutionary consciousness Fanon advocated has yet to be fully localized in Uganda. The line thus dramatizes the continued dominance of colonial epistemologies and the gap between theoretical decolonization and lived experience.

The poem's typographic gesture, where the phrase "Our National Law / Is official in English!" appears in bold and is then crossed out, visualizes the contradiction at the heart of postcolonial identity. The attempt to erase the line mirrors a desire to resist linguistic domination, yet the bold imprint remains, signifying the stubborn endurance of English as the language of law and power. Ngũgĩ's reflections resonate here: "The domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized" (17).

The poet's strikethrough becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of fully erasing colonial inscriptions without a radical linguistic shift.

Kagayi's critique extends beyond personal frustration; it interrogates the structural violence of linguistic policy. Ngũgĩ warns that as long as English remains the primary language of governance and education, Africans will continue to be alienated from their cultural roots and from one another (41–42). Kagayi's poem exposes this tension, the coexistence of inherited colonial languages and marginalized indigenous ones, as a source of psychological conflict and cultural erosion.

On the page, these allusions and typographic choices invite multiple readings, compelling the reader to revisit the poem and unpack its layered meanings. The dense, elliptical structure reflects what Lawrie Barnes calls a “marked code” that signals shifts in cultural perspective and “enables the reader to enter another world or realm of possibilities” (Barnes 36). When performed, however, Kagayi complements the textual ambiguity with song, gesture, and rhythm, translating cryptic references into embodied clarity. The stage thus amplifies the written poem's intellectual provocations, transforming linguistic reflection into communal experience.

Ultimately, the poem does not call for the rejection of English but for its repositioning. In the spirit of Ngũgĩ's *Moving the Centre*, Kagayi urges readers to “re-center” indigenous languages as vital carriers of knowledge while recognizing English as one language among many, not the sole arbiter of truth. The final return to Lusoga, accompanied by song and dance, dramatizes this re-centering: a celebratory reclamation of cultural agency and epistemic autonomy. In decentering English, the poet not only centres indigenous languages, but also makes a statement about their importance to the lives of their speakers.

Following this reading of code-switching and decolonial stance, I argue that *For My Negativity* stages language itself as the poem's principal field of struggle: its hybridity, the deliberate weaving of Lusoga, Luganda, and English (often appearing unpredictably), is not incidental ornament but the poem's central argumentative technique. The opening Lusoga passage before the foreword and the footnote gesture toward an oracular or communal source that already situates the collection within an oral/performative lineage; this calling-on-the-muse move invites comparison with long-poem practices in African writing (for example Wangusa's *Anthem for Africa*) even as it echoes the classical invocation of the muse in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, not to claim imitation but to show how Kagayi places local idioms into a transhistorical epic frame to transform influence into decolonial practice. The poem's typographic choices (bold, strikethrough, capitalization, italics), its repeated refrains with legal cadences, and its sudden insertion of highly technical legal jargon make the page itself performative: printed features cue orality, instruct the reader's voice, and stage institutional critique simultaneously. Where the text refuses standard orthography for Lusoga/Luganda while maintaining conventional English orthography, that refusal behaves like a notation of orality, a decision to transcribe performance rather than domesticate it into standard print. It therefore resists the colonial norm of linguistic sanitization. Code-switches that arrive unpredictably create productive dissonances: they force readers to negotiate meaning, to supply cultural context, and to experience the aesthetic of interruption as political intervention (Barnes 74-82).

Moreover, the heavy allusive economy (nursery rhymes, Fanon, legalese, orature forms like riddles) compels repeated readings: the written poem preserves density so that each rereading performs a work of recuperative memory. Taken together, these devices show that Kagayi's

hybridity does more than signify multilingualism; it stages a sustained epistemic challenge to Anglophone hegemony and converts the written page into a durable site of performance, memory, and legal-political interrogation.

Another poem in which Kagayi deploys code-switching with noticeable rhetorical effect is “Yellow Pupu.” Kagayi alternates fluidly between English and Luganda so that the poem addresses two overlapping publics at once: the local, vernacular community who carry the associative world of Luganda images, and the broader public who will immediately register the sloganistic line. The chorus-like cry, “Yellow-pupu-no-change! | Yellow-pupu-no-change!” (“Yellow” 45), is set in English, and that choice is strategic: it fixes the poem’s political charge in a language that transcends local dialectal boundaries and that has historically been the medium of political slogans and public discourse. By rendering the slogan in English, Kagayi ensures the line functions as an accessible, repeatable refrain, a chorus that can be picked up outside the immediate Luganda-speaking community while simultaneously being inverted and satirized by the poem.

But the poem does not stop at accessibility. The Luganda passages surrounding and puncturing the English refrain carry dense, locally-anchored imagery, and these images supply the emotional and cultural weight that the English refrain parodies. In other words, the English refrain names the political fact (the party, the slogan, the inertia) while the Luganda figurations fill in its human consequences: humiliation, impoverishment, mockery, ritual songs, and playsong echoes that local readers will recognise. That juxtaposition, universal slogan / particular suffering, creates a double address: an ironical public denunciation in English and an affective communal remembering in Luganda.

The poem's humour, the quality Alaiyed (119) draws attention to, emerges from this very juxtaposition. Code-switching can produce comic effect through incongruity and parody: a blunt, slogan ("no change") repeated like a mechanical chorus becomes ludicrous when set against the vivid vernacular catalogue of loss and ridicule; the mismatch between register (sloganistic English) and lived detail (vernacular images of betrayal, mocking songs, ritual invocations) exposes the slogan's absurdity and invites laughter that is also political contempt. In short, the humour is not merely comic relief: it is satirical. It punctures ideological pomposity by making the official language sound shrill and hollow beside the poet's grounded vernacular voice.

From a socio-linguistic and rhetorical point of view, Barnes' account of code-switching helps us see what Kagayi achieves: a marked code, here the sudden Luganda insertions into an English matrix foregrounds identity, adds local colour, and supplies political commentary; it "enables the reader to enter another world or realm of possibilities" and signals shifts in power and perspective (Barnes 74-82). Decolonial theory deepens the claim: Ngũgĩ's insistence that language is not a neutral medium but a carrier of culture (16-17) means Kagayi's bilingual choreography is itself a decolonial gesture. Ngũgĩ teaches us that reclaiming or re-centering indigenous languages is an act of restoring epistemic agency (41-42). Kagayi's code-switching operationalizes this principle on the page he uses English and Luganda not in a hierarchy but in a dialogic tension that reveals and resists colonial legacies of language privilege.

Technically, the poem's devices intensify this effect: the repetition of the refrains (a playsong/choral device), abrupt insertion of vernacular epithets or proverb-like images, and the movement from slogan to local lyric produce a layered address that reads differently on the first encounter and on rereading. The English refrain functions like a headline (a mass-media

shortform), while the Luganda sequences supply the unpacking, the anecdotal and ritual detail that make the headline legible as social critique. Where the poem performs playsong allusion or topical reference in Luganda, those moves work intertextually, pulling in the listener/reader's memory of songs, chants, and public events, and thus transform an English public utterance into an occasion for communal judgement and mockery.

In "Yellow Pupu" Kagayi uses code-switching to do three things at once: He magnifies reach; English refrains carry the political message beyond a single speech community (the slogan becomes a chorus for many), he localises meaning; Luganda inserts provide the cultural and emotional specificity that turns slogan into indictment, he politicizes form; the toggling between languages becomes the political argument: English cannot have the last word because the vernacular keeps returning to name the human cost. Read in this light, code-switching in "Yellow Pupu" is both a stylistic resource (humour, refrain, chorus) and a decolonial tactic that undermines the ideology of "no change" by making it audible, laughable, and accountable to local life and memory.

Beyond code-switching, Kagayi also composes poems entirely in vernacular, particularly in Lusoga and Luganda, demonstrating his fluency and cultural affinity with both languages. As Joan M. Ferrante and other grammarians suggest, vernacular tends to come naturally to individuals, being deeply rooted in daily experiences and identity (Ferrante 595). Kagayi's consistent use of vernacular in his poetry reflects this natural inclination as he deliberately embraces local languages not only as a medium of expression but also as a means of asserting cultural validity. Writing in Luganda and Lusoga adds a layer of genuineness and affinity with his work while also enabling

him to connect more directly with specific regional and cultural identities. An example is in his poem, “Manvuuli Kampala Busa Butwa”:

Manvuuli Kampala busa butwa
Yuganda tujitunda!
Manvuuli Kampala busa butwa
Yuganda tujitunda!

Ka Kaberamaido ka nusu kikumi!
Ka Kampala ka nusu lukumi!
Ka Siteeti Hawusi ka mutwaalo!
Mu Owino mpaamu ekido!
Naye mu K.C.C.A. nebwelibeera zzike
Musisi agyesigalize! (“Manvuuli” 36)

In the poem “Manvuuli Kampala BusaButwa,” for example, the speaker conveys deep frustration with Uganda’s socio-cultural and political realities, to the extent of making a provocative declaration: “We are selling Uganda!” While this poem is translated into English in the appendices, its original Luganda version carries a heightened emotional and political charge. The choice of language here is deliberate and significant. As with Okot p’Bitek’s *Wer pa Lawino*, where he famously noted loss of some of its richness in English translation when he stated:

Oh, yes. This was a conference in Nairobi, a cultural thing, and I read a little bit of it. And there were publishers who rushed and came to me and said, “Look, look, look, let’s have this.” So I translated the whole thing. Well rather mistranslated the whole thing because I think the Acoli version is the strongest. And incidentally too the last verse in the Acoli edition couldn’t come through in English. So I gave up. So the English version is much shorter. (Nichols 244)

Kagayi’s Luganda version of this poem resonates more significantly with local audiences because it restores linguistic intimacy, cultural authenticity, and epistemic ownership that are often diluted in translation into English. The phrase “Yuganda tujitunda!” carries a visceral force that the English equivalent, “*We are selling Uganda,*” cannot replicate. In Luganda, the emotional register of betrayal is intensified because the statement implicates Ugandans themselves in the act of

commodifying their own homeland, creating a fundamental sense of irony and collective shame. This linguistic choice reawakens cultural consciousness and fosters solidarity among listeners who share the language's emotional and historical resonances.

From a decolonial perspective, this move reflects what Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls “epistemic freedom”, the effort to think, speak, and feel outside colonial frameworks that have long dictated what counts as knowledge and meaning. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that decoloniality seeks to “restore the power to define, the right to name, and the capacity to speak from one's own location” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 25). By reverting to Luganda, Kagayi enacts this epistemic reclamation, asserting that authentic understanding of Uganda's sociopolitical condition cannot be fully articulated in a foreign tongue. The vernacular becomes a site of resistance, capable of expressing emotions, idioms, and cultural memory inaccessible through English.

Similarly, Ngũgĩ contends that language is a carrier of culture; when African writers use indigenous languages, they reconnect with “the collective memory bank of a people's experience” (*Decolonising* 15). Kagayi's Luganda version therefore does more than translate words; it translates worldview. It invites audiences into a shared symbolic universe, one that reclaims the psychic and cultural spaces colonially dislodged by English. Thus, Kagayi's linguistic shift is not a mere stylistic flourish but a decolonial strategy that preserves the emotional weight, irony, and cultural nuance of political critique. By choosing Luganda, he dismantles the linguistic hierarchy inherited from colonialism and re-centres African voices, allowing local audiences to experience the poem as both a mirror of their reality and a call to consciousness.

The poem discussed above not only reflects an intimately Ugandan perspective of events and knowledge about attitudes and emotions but also exposes, in a painfully satirical manner, how

susceptible the nation is to corruption. The speaker assigns arbitrary, meager prices to various districts, effectively placing the country on auction. While the tone initially invites humour and wit, a deeper reading reveals a disturbing metaphor of the commodification of the nation. The poem evokes the image of Uganda reduced to the status of an entity on sale to anyone interested, where different paltry sums are sufficient to acquire whole regions. The sale system seems upside down with items such as ‘*Bugaali, mbuzi, nkumbi scrap wénnyonyi*’ meaning small bicycles, goats, hoes, aeroplane scrap that would be deemed cheaper selling in billions. In the same measure, the persona indicates that besides these sales, there are also placing the brain of Abiriga on scales with sections of the constitution. The allusion to Abiriga is significant because he was a controversial figure in Ugandan politics⁹, and therefore weighing his brain next to the sections of the constitution shows how questionable the constitution has become, and besides that, the persona is hawking it for two hundred shillings; the repetition of the sum of two hundred shillings enhances the sense of hawking.

In this context, the line, “*Eby’ekinnansi byetuvuluga*” (36), meaning “we muddle up culture”, carries significant decolonial weight, highlighting the mix-up as far as political and epistemic freedom is concerned. Placing the allusion to Abiriga’s brain side by side with sections of the constitution on the same scale and the verdict on the bungling up of traditions shows the contempt with which the persona regards what is happening to the country. There is the implication that the persona deliberately speaks about the national mess in a local language to capture a larger audience by engaging them in a language he knows they will deeply understand. Beneath the apparent jest heightened by the exaggeration that underlies the claim of selling a whole nation lies a serious

⁹ Ibrahim Abiriga was a Ugandan politician, who served as a member of parliament for the Arua Municipality Constituency from 2016 to 2018. He was famous for his support for the ruling government, always dressed in yellow clothes, and he even drove a yellow car, in which he was murdered in 2018.

provocation of how this state of affairs came to be. The persona declares that ‘*Ebidiba tubitunda/ Ebibira tubitunda / Ebisaawe tubitunda/ obusozi tubutunda/ ebyobuwangwa tubitunda*’ which is translated as ‘we are selling the ponds/ we are selling the playgrounds/ we are selling the hills/ we are selling the heritage’ emphasizing that the people have gone on a craze of selling everything, including their own heritage. The poet’s exaggeration, parallelism, and cataloguing of the nation’s assets dramatize a state of what Frantz Fanon terms a “nervous condition”, a psychological and social instability born of systemic oppression and alienation under colonial and neocolonial structures (*Wretched*, 250). In this way, Kagayi’s poem functions as a decolonial text, compelling its audience to reconsider internalized attitudes shaped by neocolonial and capitalist systems, and to begin rethinking Uganda’s future from a standpoint of cultural self-respect and critical consciousness.

In Lusoga, Kagayi’s poem “*Bano Abasaadha*” (“These Men”) serves as another compelling example of his use of local language as a distinct and powerful poetic feature:

BANO ABASAADHA

*Bano abasaadha abasula ghano,
Mbatire!
Mbaboine mu ebituli
Nkole mbaviire.*

*Baita abantu baatunda emotoka
Baita abantu baatunda emotoka*

*Emotoka yebakozesa mu pandagari
Yiyo njiboine
Emotoka yebakozesa mu kwiba banka
Yiyo njiboine
Bano abasaadha tibaseka!
Tibasaaga!*

*Tomenha mugongo
Nga toidhi miigo gyeginaava
Okulaafuula bukalamu!... (“Bano” 26)*

Translation:

THESE MEN

These men who sleep here,
I am scared of them!
I see weaknesses in them.
Let me leave them.

They kill people and sell the cars.
They kill people and sell the cars.

I have seen the car they use in 'pandagari'
I have seen the car they use to rob banks
These men are tough!
They don't joke!
Don't break your back
If you don't know when they
Will give you a thorough beating!

The poem “Bano Abasaadha” opens with an intimate and fearful confession: “These men who sleep here, / I am scared of them!” This immediate declaration establishes a tone of apprehension and distrust, signaling the speaker’s proximity to violence and the uneasy coexistence between victim and perpetrator. The repetition of the line “They kill people and sell the cars” functions like a refrain, rhythmically reinforcing the omnipresence of crime and the speaker’s obsessive anxiety. As in oral storytelling traditions, this repetitive structure gives the poem a chant-like quality, transforming personal fear into collective testimony.

The catalogue of criminal acts: “I have seen the car they use in 'pandagari' / I have seen the car they use to rob banks” employs parallelism and enumeration to mimic police reports or witness accounts, grounding the poem in the texture of everyday violence. The speaker’s fearful

admiration: “These men are tough! / They don’t joke!” hints at an internal conflict: an uneasy fascination with power even as it evokes terror, reflecting the ambivalent social relationship with violent masculinity in marginalized contexts.

Kagayi then juxtaposes this violent masculinity with the delicate imagery of the men’s wives: “Weaving mats / And wearing makeup after washing clothes... their women are beautiful... like green soup... gliding like a snake.” These similes, drawn from domestic and natural imagery, soften the tone and shift the emotional focus toward tenderness and aesthetic admiration. Yet, the speaker’s gaze remains objectifying: the women are reduced to graceful bodies observed “through [the] window”, mirroring how femininity is often idealized yet constrained within patriarchal structures. The contrast between the men’s brutality and the women’s grace dramatizes the gendered duality of Ugandan society, where women’s beauty coexists with the fear their husbands inspire.

Writing this poem in Lusoga deepens its impact. The voice captures the immediacy, musicality, and emotional nuance of community speech, making the fear and admiration more visceral. As Justin Replogle observes in his discussion of Robert Frost’s poetry, poetry can function as a “language game” in which vernacular diction creates authenticity and intimacy (Replogle 140 – 42). In Kagayi’s poem, Lusoga embodies the emotional truth of the speaker’s experience; its idioms and tonal inflections carry cultural meanings that an English translation cannot fully convey. The local audience, attuned to these subtleties, recognizes the coded humour, irony, and lament embedded in everyday speech.

Moreover, from a decolonial perspective, Kagayi’s use of Lusoga asserts epistemic ownership over narratives of crime and social decay. Rather than filtering reality through English, the language of

law, policy, and colonial authority, he allows the community to speak in its own voice. The repetition of “They kill people and sell the cars” becomes both a lament and a choral accusation, echoing how oral societies process trauma through rhythmic communal expression. The poem thus performs what Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls “epistemic freedom”, reclaiming the right to interpret and express social reality through indigenous modes of knowing.

In sum, “Bano Abasaadha” operates on multiple levels: as a testimony of fear, a critique of violent masculinity, and a reflection on gendered admiration and alienation. Its Lusoga form transforms it from mere social commentary into a cultural act of witnessing, embedding the narrative within the community’s linguistic and emotional landscape. The poem’s tonal shifts from fear to fascination to lament, and its rhythmic repetition evoke the oral tradition, making its message resonate significantly among local audiences who recognize both the language and the lived realities it depicts.

Tristan Kay, in his discussion of vernacular poetry through the lens of poets such as Dante, argues that Dante’s use of the common language of the people allowed him to absorb older literary traditions and create a work that was both innovative and transformative. Dante’s *Commedia* stands not only as a product of its cultural context but also as a seminal text that reshaped the literary landscape (Kay 157). This observation affirms the deep cultural resonance and creative potential of vernacular languages in literature.

Similarly, Ngũgĩ argues that the use of indigenous languages in African writing is not merely an act of preservation but a decolonial imperative, since “language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (*Decolonising* 13). To write in one’s mother tongue is to restore a people’s memory and reclaim “the collective memory

bank of a people's experience" (15). In the same vein, Tanure Ojaide insists that African poets who employ indigenous languages or oral traditions create poetry that "speaks from within the culture," achieving authenticity and emotional immediacy that English often dilutes (*Imagination* 32). Niyi Osundare likewise observes that African poetry must be "people-oriented and linguistically accessible," emphasizing that the vernacular voice enables poets to engage audiences directly and transform poetry into a communal art form (*Communication* 45). Therefore, when Kagayi chooses to write poetry in Lusoga and Luganda, he is doing more than preserving cultural expression; he is reconnecting with indigenous knowledge systems, reclaiming epistemic agency, and participating in a lineage of writers from Dante to Ngũgĩ to Osundare, who deploy vernacular as a tool of innovation and transformation. Through this linguistic choice, Kagayi both honors his community's oral heritage and asserts the intellectual legitimacy of local languages in literary and philosophical discourse.

Upon deeper analysis, it becomes evident that Kagayi is engaged in a deliberate stylistic and linguistic rebellion, which can be viewed as a decolonial performance. By resisting the dominance of English in literary production and choosing to write in languages rooted in Ugandan heritage, Kagayi exemplifies what Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes as the "decolonial turn", a rejection of colonial epistemologies and an embrace of thinking, theorizing, and writing from the Global South (42). Kagayi's work, therefore, is not only artistic but also political, serving as a site of resistance and reclamation through language done in the act of writing, which is usually associated with the Western world.

Both code-switching and the use of local languages are components of a larger stylistic framework known as poetic diction. Poetic diction refers to the deliberate selection of words that effectively

convey the intended meaning or emotional resonance of a poem. As Yosi M. Passandaran explains, diction concerns the process of selecting words that are appropriate for articulating an idea and arranging them precisely to form meaningful expressions (Passandaran 52). This reinforces the earlier argument that code-switching and local language usage are not isolated features but are instead deliberately embedded within a poet's overall diction. Kagayi's poetry demonstrates a heightened sensitivity to diction, where each word appears intentionally chosen to reflect the socio-cultural and political contexts he seeks to critique. Rather than employing overly complex or obscure language, Kagayi opts for accessible, resonant, and culturally familiar terms that deeply engage Ugandan readers. His word choices, whether in English, Luganda, or Lusoga, are charged with political intent and cultural relevance, making diction the foundational element that enables other poetic devices to function effectively. In this way, Kagayi's diction becomes the principal vehicle through which he communicates resistance, constructs meaning, and evokes emotional response, affirming Passandaran's observation that poetic diction is central to the transmission of a poem's core message.

Passandaran further categorizes diction into four main areas: the relationship between connotation and denotation, the use of general versus specific words, the incorporation of other languages, and the application of figurative language. From this classification, he concludes that diction is fundamentally about the careful selection of appropriate words and the stylistic choices unique to each writer or poet. He notes that poets differ from one another in how they employ diction, as each brings a distinct creativity and personal style to their poetic expression (53–54). In written form, Kagayi's poems carry a strong performative dimension, revealed through his deliberate word choices. Kagayi often manipulates the texture and rhythm of language, prolonging certain words, incorporating musical elements, and selecting language that enhances the oral and performative

resonance of the text. His diction does more than deliver meaning; it establishes a dynamic relationship between poet and performance, and between poem and audience. In this way, Kagayi's diction not only defines his poetic identity but also deepens the connection between his socio-political message and his readers' lived realities.

A.F. Scott defines diction simply as the act of selecting and composing words in either speech or writing (Scott 170). This view emphasizes that diction is not merely a technical tool but a means of achieving poetic and aesthetic value. Gorys Keraf breaks down diction into three dimensions. First, he describes it as the ability to use appropriate words and expressions to communicate an idea effectively, including the proper grouping of words and stylistic choices suitable for different contexts. Second, he highlights the importance of precisely capturing the tone or emotional quality of an idea and selecting expressions that resonate with the cultural and emotional sensibilities of the audience. Third, Keraf argues that effective diction is rooted in a broad and nuanced vocabulary (Keraf 24). These definitions underscore the idea that diction in poetry is not accidental; it is a conscious craft. In Kagayi's case, his mastery of diction is evident in the way he chooses words that are socially and politically charged, culturally grounded, and performatively effective, whether in the spoken or written mode. His ability to navigate between English, Luganda, and Lusoga with clarity and intent exemplifies his alertness to poetic diction.

THESE PEOPLE! THESE PEOPLE!

These people are corrupt I swear!
I saw them with my own eyes!
These people are spiritually bankrupt
These people have leftover brains in their heads
These people bury dogs' skulls in nursery school beds
I saw them with my own eyes!
These people turn into mosquitos at night
And suck our blood at first sight

These people fry bedbugs in army green saucepans
And sell them like grasshoppers... (“These” 17)

This poem’s diction plays a powerful and deliberate role in conveying political outrage and socio-cultural disillusionment, firmly situating it within Kagayi’s larger project of language as resistance. In the context of this subsection on language choices and use, “These People! These People” exemplifies how word choice, repetition, and syntactic parallelism function as decolonial tools, exposing systemic corruption and reclaiming linguistic power for critique. The repeated phrase “These people” operates as a rhetorical refrain and weaponized linguistic choice that strips the subjects of their humanity, emphasizing moral and political decay. Each repetition intensifies the accusation, building a choral rhythm reminiscent of oral poetry and collective protest, turning individual frustration into communal indictment.

The diction is coarse, visceral, and at times absurd, as seen in phrases such as “*bury dogs’ skulls in nursery school beds*” and “*fry bedbugs in army green saucepans*” (17). The absurdity lies in the impossible and grotesque imagery, burying dog skulls where children sleep, or frying bedbugs as though they were food, expressing the irrationality of corruption and the collapse of moral order. This grotesque exaggeration functions as satirical hyperbole, inviting readers to confront the perverse normalcy of impunity and violence in contemporary Uganda. It is a linguistic protest: by making corruption sound absurd, Kagayi exposes its dehumanizing logic.

The parallel structure (“These people...”) not only creates rhythm but also mirrors bureaucratic repetition, turning language into a tool of indictment. Through negation, “These people are not people”, Kagayi dramatizes the erosion of humanity under corrupt systems, echoing Fanon’s description of the colonized world as one where oppression produces “a nervous condition” that distorts moral perception (250). The refrain’s dehumanizing tone both reflects and critiques the

language of political alienation, forcing the reader to experience the emotional fatigue of living within such a society.

Kagayi's allusion to urination carries layered symbolic weight. The lines "*They urinate on the Constitution / They urinate on our history books*" recall Napoleon's act of urinating on Snowball's plans in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, symbolizing contempt for collective ideals and democratic governance. In Uganda's political context, the imagery resonates with public desecration of institutions, suggesting how leaders metaphorically defile the Constitution, justice, and history. Urination becomes a metaphor of humiliation and desecration, embodying the poet's outrage at moral and institutional decay.

The cataloguing of transgressions, "They urinate on teachers, doctors, street vendors... pensioners" (17) links linguistic rhythm to moral indictment, enumerating the casualties of systemic corruption. This list structure, common in oral protest poetry, invites readers to visualize concrete victims and spaces, transforming abstract critique into embodied awareness.

Kagayi's diction is also emotionally calibrated: words like "*corrupt,*" "*spiritually bankrupt,*" "*leftover brains,*" and "*feast on crime*" combine colloquial tone with biting irony, conveying a voice both intimate and accusatory. The concluding warning, "*Do not say I did not tell you*", creates a colloquial intimacy with the audience, transforming the poem into a public testimony and performative prophecy. The syntactic shift to second-person address blurs the line between witness and reader, implicating all in the cycle of silence and complicity.

In the written form, these minute details: repetition, allusion, negation, and grotesque imagery make the page itself a site of performance. The spatial arrangement of lines and refrains, and the

escalating rhythm, mimic oral delivery, showing Kagayi's mastery of written orature. Each word is semantically dense, pointing not only to immediate images (dogs' skulls, bedbugs, urination) but to broader political allegories from Orwell's satire to Uganda's constitutional betrayals. Through this intricate web of associations, Kagayi demonstrates that words do not stand alone; they resonate across pages, texts, and histories, demanding that the reader pause, reflect, and engage emotionally. Thus, "These People! These People" exemplifies Kagayi's decolonial poetics: his careful diction destabilizes the complacency of everyday language, foregrounding its power to indict, to remember, and to reclaim moral clarity in a society numbed by corruption.

Kagayi's linguistic choices in "*These People! These People!*" embody what Ndlovu-Gatsheni terms epistemic disobedience, a refusal to accept the colonial and postcolonial hierarchies that privilege sanitized, "rational" modes of discourse over emotionally charged, vernacular expression. In using visceral imagery and colloquial diction to expose moral and political collapse, Kagayi rejects the detached bureaucratic language often used to obscure injustice. Instead, he embraces what Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls "epistemic freedom", the power to speak, think, and feel from one's own location (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 25). The poem's raw tone, repetition, and grotesque cataloguing break from colonial linguistic decorum, asserting the validity of emotional truth as a form of knowledge. By centering vernacular outrage, phrases like "*These people are not people*" or "*They urinate on the Constitution*", Kagayi transforms anger into an epistemic tool, reclaiming the right to define corruption and moral decay through indigenous linguistic codes rather than imported political jargon. In this way, the poem performs decolonial consciousness: it reasserts the legitimacy of African languages, emotions, and worldviews as instruments of critique, restoring dignity to suppressed voices and affirming that authentic knowledge arises from lived experience.

The word choices are rooted in the local context and resist sanitized, bureaucratic language often found in official narratives. Instead, the poem speaks in the language of the streets: bold, unapologetic, and furious. This aligns with Ngũgĩ's view that language is not neutral; it carries with it the weight of cultural memory and resistance (Ngũgĩ 16). In this case, the diction not only communicates political discontent but also performs cultural resistance by using exaggerated and performative speech as a mode of protest, especially in a written text. The raw, informal diction may seem irrational or hyperbolic on the surface, but it is intentionally performative, a kind of embodied truth-telling that resonates with Schechner's idea that performance allows for "restored behavior" (Schechner 28). In other words, the speaker is not merely describing reality but re-enacting and reinterpreting it to provoke critical awareness and perhaps even mobilization.

In the written context, this performativity is achieved through the poem's visual and rhythmic structure; the repeated refrains, parallel syntax, and escalating catalogues create a printed rhythm that mimics oral delivery. The typography and spacing invite the reader to hear the cadence and emotion internally, transforming reading into an active, quasi-performative experience. The page thus becomes a stage, allowing Kagayi's diction to perform outrage and resistance even in silent textual form.

Diction in poetry is far more flexible and grounded in emotion than convention might suggest. Davida McCaslin reflects that it is more accurate to think of poetic diction as including any word, whether grand or ordinary, traditionally poetic or colloquial, that has the power to stir human emotion. What matters most is not the complexity or prestige of the word, but its emotional resonance and its ability to communicate meaning sincerely and effectively (McCaslin 70). This perspective is particularly useful when considering Kagayi's poetic style. His deliberate use of

colloquial expressions, vernacular terms, and the speech rhythms of ordinary Ugandans, even in the written context where interactions with the audience are minimal, should be viewed as a powerful tool for emotional and political engagement. By choosing words that resonate with his audience's lived experiences, Kagayi expands the boundaries of poetic diction and affirms that the heart of poetry lies in making associations and connections between words and what they represent in the physical world, between events and ideas in what he puts on the page, between the version of reality on the page and the version of who people are and what they have done or been made to do.

It therefore becomes evident that Kagayi's poetry does more than simply defy colonial language norms; it confronts and exposes the underlying language ideologies that historically determine which tongues are deemed legitimate, intellectual, or powerful. For instance, in poems such as "Why am I telling you this in English?" and "These People! These People!", Kagayi dramatizes the tension between English, the official language of governance and education, and indigenous languages like Lusoga and Luganda, which embody local memory, humour, and emotion. By deliberately code-switching and foregrounding vernacular voices, Kagayi challenges the colonial hierarchy that associates English with progress and African languages with inferiority. His refusal to conform to standard orthography in Lusoga and his use of colloquial, street-level diction illustrate a poetic rebellion against linguistic gatekeeping and a reassertion of epistemic authority from below.

The notion of language ideology is useful here, as it allows us to interpret Kagayi's work not merely as aesthetic expression but as a conscious response to the social and political forces that have regulated speech and silenced indigenous epistemologies. As Ngũgĩ significantly argues, "the

domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized" (*Decolonising* 16). For Ngũgĩ, language is never neutral; it is "a carrier of culture" (13) and a site where worldviews are constructed or suppressed. Kagayi's poetic practice resonates deeply with this insight: by embedding Lusoga and Luganda within written texts, he not only reclaims cultural identity but also disrupts the ideological assumption that English alone can articulate intellectual thought or political critique.

This tension between vernacular centrality in lived experience and marginality in formal institutions mirrors the struggle Ngũgĩ describes, the alienation of the African subject forced to express local realities through foreign tongues. Kagayi's poetry thus becomes both an aesthetic and ideological intervention: it insists that indigenous languages are not peripheral but central to articulating truth, justice, and collective consciousness.

In conclusion, Kagayi's use of vernacular, code-switching, direct critique of the suppression of local languages, and carefully chosen diction in his poetry is not merely a stylistic choice but a bold political act grounded in decolonial resistance. Whether through entire poems written in Lusoga or Luganda, or through strategic shifts between English and local languages, or the presentation of the school's suppression of the use of local languages. Kagayi makes it clear that language is a space of power and contestation. His diction is often deliberate, oscillating between the colloquial and the elevated, between rage and satire, and between play and protest.

As Woolard and Schieffelin observe, language ideology helps link "the microculture of communicative action to political economic considerations of power and social inequality," highlighting how even everyday speech is shaped by larger systems of control (Woolard and Schieffelin 72). By privileging local languages and resisting the polished grammar of institutional

English in some of his poetry, Kagayi situates everyday speech as a site of resistance. His linguistic choices, rooted in performance, oral tradition, and the politics of place, reveal that to speak differently is to think differently, and to think differently is, ultimately, to reclaim power. In this way, language in Kagayi's work becomes not only a means of communication but a tool of decolonial intervention, challenging the macro-level constraints that continue to shape Ugandan identity and expression.

Each choice made by Kagayi reflects not only an artistic intention but also an ideological stance. This linguistic layering forces readers to think beyond aesthetics and interrogate their position within postcolonial realities. The poetry demands a reader who listens carefully, not just to what is said but to how it is said and in what language. As Ngũgĩ argues, the domination of language is one of the most effective forms of colonization because it seizes the very means through which a people define themselves (Ngũgĩ 16). Kagayi, through his poetic voice, resists this domination by repossessing the means of expression and turning them into tools for critique and cultural affirmation. His poetry thus becomes a living archive of memory, resistance, and identity, spoken in the languages that carry the weight of Ugandan experience.

4.2. Imagery and Symbolism in the Construction of Meaning in Kagayi's Written Poetry

Whenever I listened to, watched, or read Kagayi's interviews during this study, I was consistently struck by how seriously he regarded the power of poetry. In the interview conducted by Ugandan Art Speaks Out, Kagayi was asked whether any of his poems had ever evoked emotions so deep that they frightened or humbled him. Kagayi admitted that this had happened on several occasions. He spoke in particular about a poem he wrote in 2014, one he described as prophetic. The poem's conclusion, he confessed, made his heart race in fear because he believed its vision might actually

come true. He further revealed that some of what he had predicted in the poem was already becoming a reality. Interestingly, he noted that he has never performed this poem, despite having published it, because, as he put it, there are poems he fears. According to him, while the poems he performs do not scare him, some of those he has merely written and published instill fear (Uniting 00:50–02:55). This statement is telling. It reveals that Kagayi, a bold poetic voice in Uganda, sometimes feels compelled to distance himself from his own work out of concern for personal safety by leaving it in writing. This distinction he draws between written and performed poetry is particularly revealing. While written poetry allows him to explore and document powerful, even frightening ideas safely, live performance demands a more immediate engagement with the audience. In performance, poetry becomes more “biting” and visceral: it enacts gestures, tone, and rhythm that appeal directly to the senses and emotions, making the experience of fear, urgency, or empathy more immediate. Kagayi’s suggestion highlights that although the written word carries power, performance intensifies that power by translating abstract ideas into actions and sensations that resonate physically and emotionally with those who witness it.

Kagayi implies that the political climate in the country makes it dangerous to perform poetry that speaks too directly, too significantly. And yet, it is precisely this power, embedded in his diction, as discussed in the previous section, that creates such intense poetic and political tension. The deliberate choice of words in his poetry gives rise to sharp imagery and potent symbolism, which not only strengthens the emotional and intellectual force of his work but also deepens its political charge. It is for this reason that this section on imagery and symbolism follows the discussion on diction.

As a poet, Kagayi pays particular attention to the images and symbols that populate his poetry. In this regard, Grace Ryon poses a compelling question: “Where better than in his imagery is a poet so revealed?” (Ryon 55). Kagayi’s imagery becomes the space where his poetic and political concerns are most significantly expressed, particularly because even in his writing, they are reminiscent of performance. The images he evokes are grounded in the realities his readers face, and the symbols he deploys are deeply familiar and culturally resonant. With these devices, Kagayi crafts poetry that infiltrates spaces often deemed too dangerous to speak about openly, echoing the spirit of the quote that introduces this chapter, which is opening up spaces, albeit difficult ones, where people can have opportunities to think beyond what they see. His symbolism, in particular, functions as a reflective mirror, urging readers not only to see the harshness of their lived experiences but also to critically question and possibly resist it.

Kagayi’s use of imagery and symbolism, particularly in written form where the space for retrieving and reflecting seems stronger, facilitates an entry point into the Ugandan experience. His poetic landscapes, both literal and metaphorical, draw on the familiar to expose injustice, inspire reflection, and urge transformation. These poetic devices are not merely decorative; they are at the heart of how Kagayi communicates his themes and how he draws his audience into a shared space of critique, memory, and cultural affirmation.

In *Yellow Pupu Poems* and *No Speaking Vernacular!* on the written page, Kagayi extends his poetic expression by placing visual images alongside the text. This deliberate inclusion allows readers not only to imagine but also to directly engage with the visual representations that accompany his verse. In the written version of *No Speaking Vernacular!*, for example, Kagayi integrates powerful images on the page as perhaps an echo of the performance mode in which the

poem was composed, especially in the sections involving the characters of Dambya and the Head teacher. These visuals act as amplifiers of the poem’s thematic concerns, particularly the crisis of language and the urgent need for decolonization in education and identity. By embedding images within the text, Kagayi creates a multisensory experience for his readers, one that reinforces the message that decolonization is not merely a theoretical concept, but a lived and visual reality that demands critical engagement.



Figure 12: Image from the performance poem “No Speaking Vernacular!” (Vernacular 15).

The image referenced above visually represents a key moment in the performance of *No Speaking Vernacular!*. It depicts the Head Teacher of John Speke High School, mockingly referred to by students as Mr. Full Stop, publicly humiliating Dambya in front of his peers. As discussed in the previous chapter, this act of shaming stems from Dambya’s “offense” of speaking his mother tongue. A close study of the Head Teacher’s attire enhances the symbolic meaning of this scene: the spectacles suggest scrutiny and surveillance, the white inner garment and orange vest coat indicate authority and a performative display of officialdom, while the blue long outer coat and

red trousers combine to emphasize power, control, and intimidation. His pointed gesture toward Dambya, while simultaneously addressing the other students, reinforces his dual role as punisher and spectacle, making him both a figure of authority and a symbol of systemic oppression.

Dambya's costume further amplifies the symbolic weight of the moment. The brown sack draped over his school uniform connotes dirt and degradation, marking him as socially and culturally "polluted" for speaking vernacular. The bone around his neck is especially noticeable and carries multiple layers of meaning. In various African traditions, bones can symbolize strength, ancestry, and spirituality. Yet here, Kagayi transforms the bone into a grotesque instrument of shame and dehumanization. It also signals death and danger, similar to how skulls are used in warning signs, implying that speaking a local language is treated as a transgression capable of "linguistic death." The Head Teacher weaponizes the bone as a symbol of punishment, likening Dambya, and by extension all Ugandan children denied the freedom to speak indigenous languages, to an object of subjugation, even an animal. This careful layering of symbolism and imagery illustrates how Kagayi's work merges artistic expression with political critique, a method akin to Bipin Bihari Dash's reading of W.B. Yeats, where symbols convey both inner vision and broader societal commentary (Dash 30). In *No Speaking Vernacular!*, the bone, sack, and other performative details function not merely as images but as metaphors and symbols, conveying the emotional, cultural, and political stakes of linguistic repression.

Though the experience of watching a performance differs from reading a script, Kagayi's writing bridges this divide. His written text preserves these performative symbols with meticulous attention to visual and emotive detail, allowing readers to reconstruct the scene in their minds. The rhythm, tone, and layout of the poem evoke a sense of performance, so even without seeing the

stage, readers can grasp the emotional and thematic essence of the poem. Kagayi's work demonstrates that symbolism, metaphor, and imagery in performance poetry are not confined to the stage; they are transposed into the written word, making the text itself a space where performative meaning is enacted and felt.

Another powerful visual element that, in my view, directly reflects the essence of the poem itself appears in "Yellow Pupu", where the accompanying image becomes an extension of the poem's message:

Ffena tuli funduukululu
Ffena tuli funduukululu
Ffena tuyimbe tuzimbe Yuganda
Ffena tuyimbe tuzimbe Yuganda

Abiriga Talina mpale
Bwenamuwa eyange
Najipamamu! (Yellow pupu!)

Yellow pupu! Yellow pupu!
Yellow pupu! Yellow pupu!

Yellow-pupu-no-change!
Yellow-pupu-no-change! ("Pupu" 45)

Examining this poem, the first thought that crosses my mind is that it was never truly meant for the page; it was crafted for the stage. Yet I recall Kagayi's candid admission in his interview previously mentioned, where he confesses to fearing the performance of certain published poems (02:17-02:28), and suddenly, it makes sense why such a highly performative piece remains confined to the written word. The intense imagery and symbolism that Kagayi employs in "Yellow Pupu" are enough to alert any Ugandan reader to the dangerous truths embedded in the text, truths that perhaps cannot be safely spoken aloud. I must briefly acknowledge the unmistakable presence of rhythm, musicality, and repetition that mark this poem as one meant for oral delivery. Framed

as a nursery rhyme with allusion to a play song as well as sloganeering political chants and marching band rhythm, the poem adopts a double voice of children and adults but the adults do not seem to be coerced into acting juvenile, a choice that both disarms and disturbs. The chorus-like refrains and childlike cadence make the poem linger in the reader's mind like a haunting tune. Through a deceptively simple song, the poem declares that the country is overflowing with "yellow pupu", a symbol that any Ugandan would immediately associate with the dominant political party because of the colour yellow, which is the colour used by the dominant party in Uganda. The naming of districts such as Kampala, Mukono, and Kitgum ("Pupu" 46) infuses the poem with a distinct Ugandan aesthetic since these are Ugandan districts, while also allowing readers beyond Uganda who understand its political landscape to engage with the message. The subversive nature of this poem lies not only in what it says but in how it is structured to echo, to linger, and to accuse, even when performed silently, in the mind.

No matter how repulsive one may find the symbol of "yellow pupu" in Kagayi's poem, it remains a necessary and intentional symbol, one that lays bare the decay and dysfunction embedded within the country's political landscape. Kagayi's symbols, while often provocative, serve urgent and revealing purposes. The colour yellow, in particular, is not chosen at random; it is deliberately blended with faeces to convey a sharp, painful irony of the entire country which has been soiled by the dominance of the yellow-clad ruling party. The symbol is unsettling precisely because it startles the reader and compels a deeper reflection on the state of governance and the country. One noticeable example within the poem is the mention of Abiriga, the late Member of Parliament, who became nationally known for his extreme loyalty to the ruling party. According to Daily Monitor (2018), Abiriga was shot near his home in Matugga ("MP Abiriga Shot"). However, his political identity is most vividly remembered through his obsessive display of the colour yellow,

he famously dressed in yellow from head to toe as a public symbol of his unwavering and almost fanatical allegiance, as previously mentioned.



Figure 13: Abiriga, fully dressed in yellow, with his yellow car behind him — a visual embodiment of political allegiance and the symbolism Kagayi critiques in his poem.

Therefore, Kagayi finds the image of Abiriga useful in this poem. Abiriga, known for his unmistakable devotion to the colour yellow, always dressed in it and even drove a yellow car, becomes an immediate symbol of Uganda's ruling party and the extent of blind personal political branding. In the poem, the speakers in a nursery rhyme style claim that Abiriga, who had no trousers, was given a pair, and he defecated in them ("Pupu" 45). The implication, given his association with yellow, is that even his faeces were yellow. While this might seem humorous at first glance, it quickly shifts into something more tragic. The laughter evoked by the absurdity of the image soon gives way to discomfort, even pain, as the symbol sinks in: the country is drowning in "yellow pupu." It's a powerful, grotesque, and unforgettable image, one that mirrors the political decay and moral erosion the poem seeks to expose.

Another point of focus in this poem, particularly in relation to imagery and symbolism, is the drawing that concludes it. I pay close attention to these drawings not only because they serve as

noticeable examples of the direct visual imagery Kagayi employs, but also because, they are inseparable from the poem itself. They are not merely illustrations; they are extensions of the poetic text, reinforcing the message and deepening its emotional and symbolic resonance.



Figure 14: Illustration from the poem "Yellow Pupu", reinforcing the poem's imagery and symbolism ("Pupu" 47).

This image brings to mind David Goldknopf's assertion that in some poems, images are not meant to paint vivid pictures but to reinforce a deeper, often more abstract message. In such poems, Goldknopf argues, the imagery may be deliberately subdued so that the underlying meaning stands out more significantly (Goldknopf 49). While this may be true in other poetic contexts, it is not the case with Kagayi's poetry. He sustains vivid, provocative imagery and symbolism throughout his work, and rather than overshadowing the deeper message, these elements intensify it. Take the image above, for example: three children appear visibly excited as they receive what initially looks like an ice-cream cone being extended to them by an adult hand (Kagayi, "Pupu" 46–47). The nursery rhyme structure of the poem positions the speakers as children, and this illustration visually affirms that. Yet upon closer inspection, what resembles an ice-cream cone is, in fact, excrement

carefully shaped and smeared to mimic the sweet treat. The presence of flies hovering around it hints at the truth; this is not a delightful offering, but rather “yellow pupu.” The cone, in this context, becomes a symbol of the deceptive packaging of political and social dysfunction: policies and propaganda that are attractively presented to mask their foul substance. The children, joyfully receiving it, symbolize Ugandan citizens, many of whom, either through ignorance or resignation, welcome the “yellow pupu” served to them. This chilling image, therefore, reinforces Kagayi’s broader critique of the political landscape by juxtaposing innocence and deception, appearance and reality.

In a similarly child-like poem, “A Family Portrait,” a poem that presents a situation of child play with the children taking on stereotypical roles, Kagayi uses vivid imagery and layered symbolism to paint a disturbing yet vivid picture of how patriarchal violence and toxic masculinity are transmitted across generations. The image of a young boy mimicking his father by saying, “I’ll beat you, because I am Daddy” (Kagayi, “Portrait” 8), evokes a chillingly lifelike scene, one that dramatizes the internalization of violence within the family space. The image of a young girl, described with her head “slightly bowed as though coy” (8), conjures a subdued femininity and the normalization of submission, copied from her mother. Symbolically, the children’s play becomes a haunting mirror of adult relationships: the boy’s declaration, “Also like my daddy, /I’ll divorce you” (8), reflects not only the rupture in domestic unity but also the inherited power dynamics embedded in male authority. The tone throughout the poem is ruthless and imperious enhanced by the images and the frightening echoes of the fact that this kind of similar role-play is a familiar reality both in urban and rural contexts.

Kagayi turns the innocent act of playing house into a symbolic performance of societal decay, revealing how cultural scripts are learned early and unconsciously rehearsed. Through this symbolic re-enactment, the poem critiques the normalization of violence and gender inequality within the domestic sphere, suggesting that the family is not just a site of nurture, but also a theatre where oppression is rehearsed.

In “To Whom It May Concern,” another poem from the collection *Yellow Pupu Poems*, Kagayi transforms a mundane public setting, a bus, into a canvas of deeply evocative imagery and devastating symbolism. The speaker recalls forgetting a poem, not on paper, but in “the conductor’s eyes” and the “reflection of a passenger’s tears” (“Concern” 38), crafting what Darja Pavlič describes as “pure impressions” that lean toward realism and romanticism rather than abstract symbolism (Pavlič 159). The image of the slap is stark and unembellished in one-line stanza reflects violence and the fact that the conductor has the audacity and authority to slap the female passenger speaks of the power of patriarchy at play here. Within the poem’s simplicity lies a brutal commentary on everyday violence and the erasure of human dignity. Kagayi’s choice to locate the poem in a public vehicle evokes the collective experience of struggle and silence in Uganda.

The poem becomes a forgotten witness, a metaphor for the silenced observer or unheard artist. Kagayi then lets the audience think carefully about the act of forgetting, being an action that can be caused because the persona is overwhelmed. At the same time, the bus, with its hierarchies and tension, symbolizes a microcosm of societal violence and indifference. Through this subtle but piercing symbolism, Kagayi suggests that poetry is not only found in formal spaces but also in the raw, painful textures of lived experience. Like a memory left behind, his poem resists erasure by

turning a brief, violent moment into a haunting symbol of social neglect and collective responsibility.

In his review of Stephen Michael Kosslyn's *Image and Mind*, David P. Perkins presents a compelling analysis of how mental imagery functions within poetry. He identifies four central aspects through which imagery becomes especially powerful in poetic expression. First, in terms of vividness, mental images tend to elicit emotional and psychological reactions more intensely than the literal statements or ideas that initially provoke them. Second, regarding informativeness, Perkins notes that images can convey layers of meaning that go beyond what is explicitly stated in the text, offering insights not immediately evident in the words themselves. Third, he discusses autonomy, describing mental imagery as functioning like an independent stimulus, capable of triggering reactions that may diverge from or even challenge the original intent of the accompanying verbal expression. Finally, through iconography, Perkins emphasizes the symbolic strength of images, highlighting their ability to serve as condensed visual representations of broader conceptual systems or themes (Perkins 314–318).

Perkins' framework on mental imagery becomes particularly relevant when examining Kagayi's poetry. Firstly, vividness is a core strength of Kagayi's images, a feature strengthened by most of the poems being either first performed or written for performance. Whether it is the bone tied around Dambya's neck or the yellow cone of feces being offered to children, the emotional responses these evoke are shock, anger, even disgust and are far stronger than if Kagayi had merely described these injustices. Secondly, informativeness is key to understanding his imagery. The illustrations and verbal symbols in his poetry communicate a deeper truth about the Ugandan political and social environment, truths that may be missed if the reader only focuses on the literal or surface meanings of the poems. Thirdly, through autonomy, Kagayi's images stand as

provocative agents on their own. For instance, the image of the yellow pupu cone may trigger associations and interpretations beyond Kagayi's explicit message, challenging readers to reckon with their complicity, apathy, or even unconscious assimilation of oppressive realities. Lastly, his work demonstrates immense iconographic power. The yellow color, the bone, and even the smiling children receiving feces are not just isolated symbols; they operate as visual summaries of Uganda's political decay, cultural alienation, and manipulated innocence. Kagayi, therefore, does not simply describe; he constructs visual systems that demand recognition and, more importantly, introspection.

Kagayi employs imagery and symbolism with a comparable force, crafting poems that not only challenge Uganda's socio-cultural and political realities but also confront the reader directly. His symbols are not merely decorative; they demand reflection and action, urging readers to consider their own role in the circumstances his poetry critiques. This brief exploration of imagery and symbolism in Kagayi's poetry has led me to encounter the Imaginist poetic theory, a framework I intend to explore further in a separate study, where I might focus exclusively on imagery and symbolism in Kagayi's work or that of another poet. What intrigued me most about this theory is articulated by C. V. Ponomareff, who observes that within Imaginism, the aesthetic and social role of poetry is to serve as an emotional agitator, one that unsettles the human heart (Ponomareff 294). From my reading and viewing of Kagayi's poetry, I am convinced that his use of imagery and symbolism fulfills precisely this function. His chosen images provoke visceral responses, challenging Ugandan readers to reflect on the harsh realities of their nation and imagine a more just and hopeful future. His images do not exist in isolation; they extend into performance and are deeply embedded in the politics of decoloniality.

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni outlines three core dimensions of decoloniality: “the coloniality of power, the coloniality of knowledge, and the coloniality of being” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 489). Kagayi’s symbolism persistently recalls these dimensions. His poetry interrogates who holds power, who is authorized to produce knowledge, and who is permitted full humanity in postcolonial Uganda. Through powerful visual and verbal symbols, he critiques lingering colonial structures and reclaims space for local agency and voice. His poetry operates not only as an aesthetic expression but as a performative and decolonial act even in print. Kagayi’s noticeable use of imagery and symbolism serves not only as a literary device but also as a tool of resistance, a call to consciousness, and a challenge to colonial legacies in Uganda.

4.3. Voice, Tone, and the Performance of Ugandan Realities on Page

Kagayi’s poetry deeply explores the emotional and psychological textures of life in Uganda. His voice is not merely a conduit of feeling but a complex medium of protest, introspection, and provocation. Through his poems, Kagayi constructs a performative voice that does not seek comfort in subtlety or aesthetic detachment. Rather, his tone, even in writing, is sharp, confrontational, urgent, and even violent in imagination, drawn from the violent contradictions of the society he describes. In the poem “I Want to Write a Poem,” for instance, the persona envisions poetry not as a balm but as a weapon: “I want to write a poem / Spewing bullets / Into children’s heads... / Spread it in pepper spray... / Into a rope to hang / Those who choose not to vote it / Into power” (“Poem” 54). This metaphorical intensity foregrounds a tone that oscillates between anger and bitter irony. It is this tone that embodies the poet’s refusal to remain silent or subdued in a society where speech itself has been criminalized, where art is expected to entertain, not to agitate.

As Laurence Perrine notes, tone is not a single aspect of poetry but an effect that emerges from the interplay of diction, imagery, structure, and sound devices; and if one misses the tone, one is likely to misread the entire poem (Perrine 395). Kagayi's use of imagery, particularly violent, anatomical imagery, crafts an unmistakable emotional pitch. When he speaks of "pliers... squashing / Extracted toes sprawling / On safe house floors" (54), the tone is one of visceral confrontation, achieved through the images used. This tone invites alarm, urging the reader to feel implicated in the conditions being described. Such tonal clarity is never neutral; it aligns the reader with the moral urgency of the poet's perspective. The poem becomes an affective space where the political pain of the nation is felt in the body of the reader, deliberately disrupting any notion of poetic distance or aesthetic escape.

Equally, Kagayi's poetic voice navigates a terrain between raw self-expression and deliberate performative construction. Thomas Ogden's insight that voice is neither wholly the "true self" nor a theatrical "false self" but a medium for both conscious and unconscious experimentation is particularly relevant here (Ogden 427). Kagayi's voice is often multi-voiced; it speaks as citizen, witness, and prosecutor all at once.

This multi-voiced tone is also seen in another poem, "Listening to Poetry," where the persona adopts a tone of subdued sarcasm and quiet foreboding. "Today we shall listen to poetry / While seated comfortably... / Yesterday we listened to guns coughing" ("Listening" 1). The repetition of the phrase "while seated comfortably" with the contrast of yesterday, the guns coughing creates a rhythm of irony, drawing attention to the hypocrisy of pretending normalcy in the face of political violence. The poem "I Want to Write a Poem" relies on tone to challenge passive spectatorship and the illusion of peace. The voice here is measured, and it performs restraint to underscore

suppressed dread. Through such tonal control, Kagayi's poetic voice expresses both the trauma of the past and the anxiety of the future.

A critical insight from Barbara MacMahon suggests that voice in literature, especially poetry, should be understood not merely as stylistic but as a communicative strategy that bridges the literary and non-literary (MacMahon 25). Kagayi's poetry, then, does not simply "tell" political truths; it "shows" them through the dramatization of tone and the emotional textures of voice. His poem "The Country You Would Rather Not Know About" serves as a fitting example. The tone here is mournful, even fatalistic: "This is not the time to rise up... / They will shoot you... / They will eat your children... / They will cut your tongue out" ("About" 62). The voice is resigned but also accusatory. It dares to name what others would prefer to ignore. Through repetition and bleak imagery, Kagayi's poetic persona resigns to silence not as submission, but as a rhetorical mirror to the nation's suppressed dissent. The poem expresses despair, but it also calls attention to it, making the reader confront the discomfort of complicity and helplessness.

This performative interplay of voice and tone also speaks to poetry's pedagogical power, as Mitchell and Henderson suggest. They argue that poetry offers a dynamic space for experimenting with tone, rhythm, voice, and theme while also modeling the craft of language as a vessel for beauty, truth, and history (Mitchell and Henderson 28). Kagayi's poems are thus not only political critiques; they are also instructional in their use of poetic voice as a tool for engaging civic consciousness. The subtle yet deliberate control of tone, whether angry, ironic, mournful, or incantatory, demonstrates how poetry can function as a space of resistance. Kagayi's voice is not didactic in the traditional sense; it does not preach, but it performs urgency, embodying a collective cry for change that resonates with readers and future poets alike.

In the poems of Kagayi, voice and tone can also be explored within the context of Ndlovu-Gatsheni's assertion that coloniality persists in "the control of culture, authority, and subjectivity" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 21). Kagayi's writing, characterized by its raw, urgent tone, actively resists this cultural and epistemic domination. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes the "epistemic struggle," as the fight to regain the right to define one's reality and history, Kagayi's poetic voice serves as a weapon in that struggle. His aggressive, almost confrontational tone, embodied in lines like "I want to write a poem / Spewing bullets / Into children's heads," highlights not only the poet's anguish but also the collective repression of a people's cultural memory. The force of his voice challenges the imposition of colonial languages and histories, fighting to reassert control over the narrative. Here, the voice transcends a mere tool for self-expression; it becomes a battleground where the decolonial struggle is waged in the face of continued marginalization.

Taylor's concept of performance as a medium that transmits cultural memory and political resistance through embodied acts (Taylor 20–21) offers a valuable lens to understand the performative quality of Kagayi's poetry even when rendered in written form. Even though these works are written, the urgency and immediacy of the poet's tone suggest a repertoire that anticipates performance. Taylor emphasizes how performance embodies lived experience and transmits a collective history, often providing a space for resistance. In Kagayi's work, this resistance is expressed not just through the content of his poems but through the intensity of the voice and the rhythmic cadences that echo the rhythms of protest. The tone of his poetry is not merely a reflection of societal conditions, but a call to action. A demand that the readers or listeners, in a performance confront the violent realities he portrays. Like Taylor's notion of the repertoire, Kagayi's work invites participation; it requires that the audience feels the political

urgency in the same way one feels the impact of performance. The tone as used in Kagayi's poems aims to create change by moving beyond words into the realm of action.

Ultimately, Kagayi's written poetry reveals that voice and tone are not just elements of form, but performative strategies that animate the lived realities of Ugandans under political repression. His poems blur the lines between speaker and witness, between aesthetics and activism. By attending closely to the tonal textures and vocal dynamics of his poems, one begins to recognize how his art becomes a public act of performance, a literary performance that makes Ugandan realities audible, visible, and inescapably felt.

4.4. Form, Structure, and the Rhythms of Collective Memory

Shared memory is rooted in lived experience, either directly encountered or historically inherited, forming a vital part of the nation's collective consciousness. Margaret H. Freeman, in her work on poetic form, compellingly argues that a poem derives its life from the very elements it is composed of: its sounds, rhythms, meters, word forms, and sentence structures (193). These are not mere aesthetic embellishments but constitute the poem itself. Freeman further underscores that visual features such as line breaks, stanzaic arrangements, and spacing shape how a poem is read and felt, some of which has already been done in the previous analysis of this work. According to Freeman, form is inseparable from emotional experience; the feelings evoked by a poem are expressed and mediated through its structural composition. As such, poetry becomes a vital cognitive and emotional tool, an artistic medium through which inner experiences are rendered tangible and comprehensible (Freeman 193).

I argue that form and structure are indispensable to the interpretation of Kagayi's written poetry in particular. These features are not peripheral; they are central to understanding the emotional,

historical, and sociopolitical resonances embedded in his work. In this section of the chapter, I explore how aspects such as stanza layout, repetition, and parallelism contribute to the meaning-making process in Kagayi's written poetry. Like Freeman, I maintain that the form of a poem cannot be divorced from its meaning. Given that this chapter is dedicated to identifying and analyzing the most distinctive stylistic features of Kagayi's written poetry and how these features inform reader interpretation, this section shows how his formal techniques sharpen the impact of his messages while still embedded in the notions of performance. Through these structural choices, Kagayi's poetry metaphorically wields a blade that cuts deeply into the Ugandan consciousness and, by extension, into the African experience, where similar socio-cultural and political struggles persist.

In their definition of form, M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham assert that it refers to "the organization of the parts of a work of art in relation to its total effect" (Abrams and Harpham 122). They stress that an understanding of form is essential for interpreting both the meaning and the aesthetic value of literary texts. Kagayi is a poet who demonstrates a deliberate and thoughtful engagement with form in his poetry. His stanzaic groupings are intentionally arranged to contain and develop unified ideas. Each stanza serves as a container for a particular thought or concern, enhancing the thematic coherence of the poem. Beyond this internal organization, Kagayi also structures his poems to shape the reader's interpretive and emotional journey. This formal discipline is evident even in his longest poem, *No Speaking Vernacular!*, a text designed with performance in mind. Despite its length and spoken-word orientation, the poem maintains a close intersection with the written mode, featuring grouped stanzas that follow a logical and performative flow. Kagayi's awareness of the performance dimension is embedded in his writing process; even on the page, his poetry carries the rhythms, pauses, and intonations of oral delivery.

This fusion of written and performed poetry illustrates the fluid boundary between text and performance in his work, where the printed poem is always a potential script for oral enactment.

In the personal interview I conducted with Kagayi, he emphasized how central form is to his creative process. From the initial conception of an idea to its realization on the page and stage, form functions as the framework that supports both the content and its impact:

The inescapable duty to express myself on an issue my creative spirit warrants that I must make utterance of. As for the how, that depends on the lexical nature and environment of either the metaphors and themes that I use to design the poetics of a particular expression. Each poem, like each breath, is distinct in its formulation, functionality and subsequent execution. (Kagayi)

His poetry, therefore, does not merely adopt form as an aesthetic choice; it uses form to translate political, emotional, and cultural insights into a performative literary experience, whether on page or stage, informed by lived experience and history.

In *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry explores the foundational concepts of structuralism, particularly its relevance to literary texts. He asserts that "structuralism is a method of identifying the underlying structures that govern all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel" (Barry 39). This assertion underscores the central role of structure in shaping not only meaning within a text but also how that meaning is perceived and interpreted by readers. Structure, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic arrangement but a system through which cultural and emotional insights are communicated.

In Kagayi's poetry, structural elements are used deliberately to reinforce thematic concerns and enhance the poetic experience. As discussed in the previous chapter on performance, Kagayi's use of repetition is a noticeable feature of his performative style. This repetition also finds a clear

presence in his written poetry, where it works hand in hand with other structural features such as parallelism. These elements serve not only to emphasize key ideas but also to build a rhythm that mirrors the musicality of performance. The parallel structures within his poems often mirror ideological dualities or contradictions, thereby enabling readers to engage with the text on multiple levels. Through such structural choices, Kagayi ensures that the formal architecture of his poems contributes actively to the political and emotional force of his messages.

Repetition and parallelism function as deeply political and culturally resonant forms. The structural rhythms in his works embody the patterns of memory, orality, and historical contestation within Uganda's postcolonial space. Through lexical, syntactic, and rhythmic repetition, Kagayi mobilizes poetic form to reclaim oral heritage, confront political absurdities, and inscribe collective trauma. His manipulation of poetic structure creates an experience that is as performative as it is reflective, grounding the reader or listener in the rhythm of cultural remembering.

Give me yellow blood
Give me yellow blood
Give me yellow blood Mzee
Give me yellow blood

I want the yellow sun
To ride the yellow bus
I want the yellow power
To make the yellow dimes
I want the yellow wave
To meet the yellow dames
I want the yellow stanza
To make another Rap... (Kagayi, "Yellow" 31-32)

As Jonathan Culler notes, "genres and conventions are not neutral but carry cultural values and assumptions" (Culler 59). Kagayi's deployment of repetition must be read within this framework.

His poetic forms echo the chants, refrains, and call-and-response traditions of oral performance in East Africa. In “Give me Yellow Blood”, the recurrent demand for “yellow” items unfold as an escalating litany of materialism plus echoes of blind partisan behaviour. Beneath this satirical catalogue lies a deeper critique of political complicity and social decay. I have already discussed the symbolic significance of the colour yellow within the Ugandan political context, particularly in its association with decay, as symbolized by faeces in Kagayi’s earlier poem. However, it is worth noting that in this poem, Kagayi subverts this same symbolism through a satirical appeal repeated throughout the poem: “Give me yellow blood.” The speaker demands an overwhelming abundance of yellow: yellow shirt, yellow tie, yellow trousers, yellow gown, yellow house, and, most hyperbolically, yellow blood. This exaggerated repetition invites the reader to question the speaker’s intent. Why does Kagayi, who earlier associated yellow with repulsion, now seemingly embrace it?

The answer lies in the stylistic devices he employs, particularly repetition, hyperbole, and satire. The deliberate overuse of the colour yellow, combined with the absurdity of asking for yellow blood, transforms the speaker’s tone into one of biting irony. It becomes clear that this is not an appeal born of admiration, but one meant to ridicule blind political allegiance. The repetition serves not only to emphasize the absurdity of total political conformity but also to reinforce the poem’s performative quality. Even in the absence of a live performance, Kagayi’s strategic use of repetition and parallelism compels the reader to engage with the poem in a performative manner, echoing the rhythms of a staged spoken word piece. This is one of the clearest examples of how Kagayi’s poetry transcends the written page, using form and structure to provoke thought and resistance through performance-like textuality.

Helena Vendler’s insight that “form is not a mold but a means of discovery” (Vendler 3) aligns with how Kagayi uses repetition to explore his speakers’ psychological and cultural positions. Repeating “Give me yellow blood” across various stanzas, the speaker in “Give me Yellow Blood” is not simply affirming a desire for inclusion in the ruling elite but uncovering the contradictions of that desire. The poem reveals how political affiliation, symbolized by the color yellow, demands personal and ethical compromises. As the speaker transitions from wanting a yellow cup to vowing to “kill the yellow gossip,” the poem exposes how repetition can slide from innocent longing into monstrous allegiance. Here, form enables a chilling journey of ideological transformation, highlighting how structural choices can convey not just emotion, but evolution.

Moreover, the exaggerated final refrain of “happpppyy... (I promise)” in “Give me Yellow Blood” offers a stunning example of rhythmic and phonetic manipulation. The prolonged vowels, mimicking both intoxicated joy and desperate persuasion, showcase how repetition can perform irony. The speaker, once an eager supplicant, has become a propagandist, blurring the line between personal ambition and public deception. The line “Give me yellow bloood”, with its drawn-out final syllable, becomes a sonic climax, simultaneously grotesque and comedic. This manipulation of sound underscores how repetition can heighten both emotional intensity and satirical critique.

Furthermore, repetition in Kagayi’s work serves as an instrument of performative memory, echoing the communal storytelling dynamics of African oral traditions.

The elephant and the ant,
What is stronger?
Now you see! Now you don’t!
Give me your chief – that one I am pointing at
Hand him over I empty him
Inside this hole of the small black ant
Do you know where I’m from?

It is what it is (let it come!)
It is what it is (let it come!)... (“From” 9)

In the poem “Do You Know Where I’m From?”, the speaker explores the search for identity and belonging through surreal, symbolic imagery, reflecting the speaker’s struggle to be understood in a world marked by mystery, displacement, and cultural ambiguity. The chorus-like refrain, “It is what it is (let it come!),” recurs throughout the poem like a breath between bursts of surreal imagery and accusatory questions. Each reappearance of the question, “Do you know where I’m from?”, draws attention not only to the speaker’s search for identity but also to the listener’s complicity in forgetting. The refrain becomes a lament and a provocation. Its repetition anchors the speaker’s unstable world in a rhythmic certainty that resists erasure.

David Lodge observes that “the structure of a narrative is part of its meaning” (Lodge 87). In Kagayi’s case, the repeated structures are not simply containers of meaning; they generate it. In both poems, structural parallelism, especially the use of list-like stanzas, builds dramatic intensity. The lines “I want a yellow...” followed by nouns in “Give me Yellow Blood”, and “I see...” followed by bizarre imagery in “Do You Know Where I’m From?”, form predictable but unsettling rhythms. These rhythmic repetitions resemble ritual incantations, creating a trance-like effect that draws the audience into a collective experience. Such oral features echo traditional ceremonies and communal gatherings where repetition solidifies memory and intensifies participation. In this way, form becomes both a cultural conduit and a political commentary.

Rhythmic patterns in Kagayi’s poems bring out a musical feel, making them fit well for spoken word shows. A bouncy rhythm-like “Now you see! Now you don’t!” in “Do You Know Where I’m From?” adds flair while poking fun or pointing fingers at deeper issues. Take the line “It is what it is (let it come!)”, It pops up again and again, acting like a song hook, pulling listeners into

clapping along or shouting back. That steady beat builds momentum, sharpens the tone when speaking straight to the crowd, and stirs things up with questions such as “Do you know where I’m from?”, drawing people in so they think harder or reply on instinct. Repeating that one phrase three times breaks smooth storytelling apart, hinting at how truth slips away and history often hides behind shadows. In this case, rhythm isn’t just about music. It breaks how we usually think, matching Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s idea that colonialism twists ways of knowing (42). Because of Kagayi’s repeated lines, memory gets reshaped, dragging Uganda’s past into a looping, living now. In these poems, repetition and parallel lines work like tools, both artistic and loaded with meaning. Because they come from spoken roots, they boost the political message while building rhythms that live out the loops they question: control, longing, loss. Since Kagayi plants repeating patterns deep inside his verses, he’s not just copying shapes, he brings them alive. His writing turns into a place where remembering isn’t frozen, instead flows in beat-like rituals. A spot where form doesn’t trap, yet hits like a steady pulse pushing back.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter has discussed features such as imagery, symbolism, diction, structure, and repetition, as some of the most outstanding in Kagayi’s written poetry. While it is true that Kagayi’s work is rich with other notable literary devices, including alliteration, simile and metaphor, and especially historical and literary allusions, my deeper insight is that the features analyzed in this chapter form the structural and thematic foundation upon which these other devices gain visibility and significance. Together, these stylistic elements interact to construct meaning, not only within the context of the individual poems but across Kagayi’s broader artistic vision.

What becomes increasingly evident is that these features work interdependently to achieve the aesthetic, cultural, and political resonance of Kagayi's poetry. Much like in his performed work, these outstanding features in his written poems serve as the necessary scaffolding through which he articulates complex ideas, critiques social realities, and stirs his readers' emotions and awareness. I must admit that it has been difficult to read Kagayi's poetry without imagining it being performed. His deep roots in spoken word clearly inform his written style, making the transition between stage and page almost seamless. While there are elements unique to live performance, Kagayi's written texts retain a performative rhythm, tone, and power that compel the reader to hear and feel the poem beyond the printed word. The effect of this is a heightened sense of immediacy and emotional engagement, as readers are drawn into the poem as active participants rather than passive observers. It allows the text to transcend the page, echoing the oral traditions from which it draws, and reinforces Kagayi's decolonial aim of reclaiming poetry as a communal, lived experience rather than an elitist literary artifact.

Kagayi's written poetry, which I am increasingly inclined to refer to as the "written word," is not merely a static textual product. It is a living, effective, and politically charged space. Through its distinct stylistic features, it emerges as a potent site of socio-cultural critique and political renewal, engaging Ugandan readers in reflective and transformative ways, even outside live performance.

CHAPTER FIVE

MEMORY, STRUGGLE, AND SOCIAL AWAKENING IN KAGAYI'S POETRY

5.0. Introduction

The concept of *meaning* has repeatedly surfaced, whether in Kagayi's efforts to craft poetry that resonates with his audiences or in the readers' interpretative engagement with both his written and performed works. These earlier discussions have laid the groundwork for this chapter, which turns directly to the central concern of meaning-making in Kagayi's poetry. While Chapter Three examined the role of performance in his poetic craft, and Chapter Four focused on the stylistic features that enhance comprehension and impact on the page, this chapter delves into the thematic essence of his work. I explore Kagayi's messages to his readers and audiences, particularly his representation of socio-cultural and political change.

In his reflections on theme in poetry, Louis Simpson asserts that themes emerge through experience; that is, everything the mind absorbs "from childhood to maturity." He further explains that a poet discovers a theme through living and thinking, and once expressed in writing, that theme becomes part of the collective experience of readers (Simpson 96–97). This perspective reinforces my understanding: the performative strategies and stylistic choices discussed earlier are not merely aesthetic but deliberate tools through which Kagayi's thematic concerns are rendered accessible and powerful.

To further emphasize the significance of theme, Simpson revealingly observes that through it, "literature is the folklore of the educated" (97). In this sense, poetry, including Kagayi's, becomes a modern form of shared cultural storytelling and moral reflection although in Kagayi's case, the poetry may speak before those regarded as formally educated because he composes in at least three

languages. It is therefore illuminating to introduce this chapter with Kagayi's own words regarding the driving force behind his writing and performance, a statement that encapsulates the purpose and urgency of the themes he explores:

Nowadays, as artists, we go to perform for people who are just present, but not in audience. So for me that's the thing that I am really interested in right now. Who is authentic? Who needs my work? That's the person I want. I am not after the person with the money anymore. I am after the person who needs poetry, who needs art, who needs theatre because those people are there, but their spaces have been taken over by people who are looking for entertainment, people who are looking to laugh, to numb their pain, but not to heal it. (*Conversation* 06:18-06:58)

In his interview with the Ugandan Art Speaks Out podcast, Kagayi makes one thing resoundingly clear: his poetry is not written to amuse, entertain, or make a living. It is written for the soul that aches. It is crafted for those who carry the weight of silence, who walk through the shadows of injustice, and yet are told to smile, to keep quiet, to move on. His poetry is not just a performance of words; it is a performance of pain, memory, and resistance. His words aim to reach into the dark corners of our national consciousness, into those unspeakable spaces where truth has long been buried under layers of fear, indifference, or censorship.

Kagayi's thematic landscapes are not imagined; they are lived. They reflect a country that is bleeding quietly, a society accustomed to its wounds. Yet in every line, every metaphor, every deliberate repetition, Kagayi insists that we stop pretending, that we look, that we feel, that we remember. Because, according to him, in remembering, we begin to heal. And in healing, we begin to reclaim what has been taken: our voice, our agency, our right to name our suffering and demand a different reality.

His poetry is a call to consciousness. It does not ask for permission to speak; it demands to be heard. It breaks the chains of imposed silence. It rewrites what it means to be Ugandan, not as a subject to be ruled, but as a citizen who must remember, must resist, and must re-imagine. His thematic exploration of Uganda's socio-cultural and political struggles is more than literary; it is revolutionary. Through verse, Kagayi attempts to decolonize not only the institutions but the psyche; not only the language but the logic behind the language; not only the nation but the very idea of belonging. Kagayi's poetry does not sit quietly on the page. It rises. It confronts. It refuses to be ignored. It reminds us that the true work of poetry, especially in postcolonial spaces like Uganda, is not to escape reality but to transform it. In this way, Kagayi's poetry exemplifies what Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls the "decolonial turn", a conscious awakening that exposes and resists the lingering structures of coloniality in power, knowledge, and being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 11). His verse becomes a site of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni terms "epistemic freedom," the deliberate act of thinking, imagining, and speaking from one's own location and lived experience rather than within the boundaries of colonial epistemologies (14). By rewriting the Ugandan subject as one who remembers and resists, Kagayi enacts what Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes as the process of "remembering the dismembered", restoring broken identities and reclaiming silenced voices as an act of liberation (42). Thus, the effect of Kagayi's poetic consciousness is transformative: it awakens the reader to the colonial wound, asserts agency, and repositions poetry as a revolutionary tool for reimagining both self and nation.

5.1. Reclaiming the Self: Language, Memory, and the Politics of Reclamation

I have already discussed language as a stylistic tool in previous chapters. Still, its persistent re-emergence demands that it be treated not only as style but also as theme, arguably one of the most urgent aspects of Kagayi's poetry. Whether through a direct critique of English language dominance in Ugandan society or through his use of Lusoga and Luganda, Kagayi insists on bringing the "language question" to the center of poetic and political reflection. This insistence resonates with Ngũgĩ's argument that language is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture, memory, and identity. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ contends that the domination of African languages by colonial languages like English results in "spiritual subjugation" and alienation from one's own heritage (Ngũgĩ 9). He therefore calls for a deliberate return to African languages as a way of reclaiming cultural agency and mental liberation (Ngũgĩ 28). Kagayi's poetic choices reflect this decolonial imperative: his multilingual approach becomes an act of resistance, reasserting the validity of indigenous languages in literary and political discourse. His work reminds us that language is never neutral. It carries memory, power, and worldview. In his compelling argument on decolonizing the English literary curriculum, Nathan Suhr-Sytsma observes that English speakers, particularly those in privileged positions, may unknowingly continue colonial patterns through language, often reinforcing the marginalization of local languages. He argues that such speakers bear the responsibility to support and uplift endangered languages and worldviews, and that poetry is a powerful means to do so (Suhr-Sytsma 463). In this way, Kagayi's poetry aligns with Ngũgĩ's vision of linguistic decolonization using verse as a weapon to restore voice, dignity, and epistemic freedom to African communities.

African poets like Kagayi are already calling us back to our mother tongues, not just for nostalgic reasons but as an act of resistance and reclamation. His poetry is a living testament to the idea that language is not only how we speak but also how we know, how we belong, and how we fight. The dominance of English, both in education and public discourse, has rendered indigenous languages not only endangered but also delegitimized, treated as lesser, informal, and even irrelevant in certain spaces. Kagayi confronts this directly, not only by code-switching between English and Luganda or Lusoga but also by thematically interrogating the power dynamics behind linguistic hierarchies. This is not a new struggle. It stretches back to foundational literary debates in Africa, including the 1962 Makerere Conference of African Writers of English Expression, a moment that marked one of the earliest public reckonings with the language question in African literature (Ngũgĩ 14-17). The question remains alive today, and poets like Kagayi are ensuring it stays debated, vibrant, and necessary. Language, as many decolonial theorists and African writers agree, is central to the struggle for decoloniality. Kagayi does not just write in language; he writes about it, through it, and against its colonial distortions. He uses style to build a theme, and that theme, ultimately, is freedom: the freedom to speak, to write, to remember, and to imagine in one's language.

Suhr-Sytsma's argument about the politics of language gains even more weight when placed alongside Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who insists that language lies at the very heart of Africa's struggle against imperialism. For Ngũgĩ, the continued use of colonial languages in African literature is not a neutral or stylistic decision; it is a deeply political act, one that often perpetuates colonial structures of power. Decolonizing African literature, in his view, demands nothing less than the reclamation of indigenous languages as instruments of identity, resistance, and liberation (Ngũgĩ 514). Kagayi echoes this call with conviction, taking his place within this long and ongoing

intellectual and artistic struggle. One of the most powerful examples of this is his performance poem *No Speaking Vernacular* (2019), which was discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

While this chapter focuses on the poem as it appears on the page, it is impossible to forget its performed origins. As earlier noted, performances naturally allow for flexibility. Poets often rework lines, add emphasis, or shift tone to heighten effect and make the message resonate more deeply with live audiences. And yet, even when stripped of voice, gesture, and sound, *No Speaking Vernacular* still pulses with urgency. On the page, Kagayi paints visual and linguistic images that bring the performance to life in the reader's imagination. As discussed in Chapter Four, the stylistic choices of repetition, diction, allusion, structure, among others create a vivid aurality that pushes the reader into an active, almost participatory mode of reading. The poem refuses to be silent. It invites performance even when none is physically present.

In this way, Kagayi bridges Ngũgĩ's ideological insistence with an aesthetic strategy: he not only critiques the violence of linguistic colonization but also performs resistance through the very medium of his poetry. Whether on stage or in print, *No Speaking Vernacular* demands that we confront the ways language has been used to control, marginalize, and erase. And in doing so, it insists quietly, loudly, persistently that our languages are worth fighting for. For example, he presents the irrational voice of the Headteacher:

...He threatens our civilization

Dambya does not
Respect our regulations
I want John Speke High School
To be a first class school.

Now, if you excuse me
Daudi take Dambya with you

And bring him back after three weeks
I hope he learns
His lesson this time

English is the language
Of the civilized. (*Vernacular* 31)

In this excerpt, Dambya's uncle, Daudi, is summoned to meet the Headteacher regarding what is deemed a serious offence committed by Dambya at school. The so-called crime was nothing more than uttering a simple Luganda word, "gwe", meaning "you." For that, Dambya is not only shamed in front of his peers but also suspended from school for three weeks. What is most noticeable in this moment is the Headteacher's reasoning when he claims that Dambya poses a threat to African "civilization" and declares English to be the language of the civilized (31). This line, laced with biting satire, urges us, as readers and audiences, to reflect deeply on the politics of language. That a Ugandan educator, in a Ugandan school ironically named *John Speke High School*, can so confidently denigrate his own language in favour of English speaks volumes. The issue at hand is far graver than it initially appears.

Through satire, Kagayi makes us laugh, but only momentarily. The poem also develops a powerful theme of memory. For many of us, this memory begins in school, when students were punished for "speaking vernacular." Back then, we laughed at them, not knowing the gravity of what was being silenced. But Kagayi's poem reopens this memory with sharp irony. It is still humorous in form, yet beneath the laughter lies an unsettling realization: the laughter was misplaced. What once seemed funny is now tinged with guilt and fury; guilt for the complicity in mocking our own tongues, and anger at the teachers, headmasters, and national institutions that still treat English as a mark of intelligence and success, while our indigenous languages are cast aside as backward. This irony echoes Kiguli's recollection of her own schooling in an interview with Graham Mort,

where learners who broke the “speak no vernacular” rule were publicly punished, a memory she describes as both formative and painful, revealing how early Ugandans were conditioned to associate English with authority and value (Mort 3). Julius Ocwinyo similarly recalls in the same interview that, although English was recognized as a colonial language, it became the very frame upon which education and social advancement were constructed (Mort 9). Their testimonies confirm the historical reality Kagayi satirizes: the classroom as a site of linguistic violence disguised as discipline. The effect of this satire, therefore, is twofold; it revives collective memory while exposing how humor can conceal deep wounds of cultural erasure, prompting readers to confront their complicity and to re-evaluate what they once accepted as normal.

As I read and re-watched Kagayi’s *No Speaking Vernacular*, I found myself haunted by this guilt. Like many Ugandans, I struggle to speak my own language, not because I do not value it, but because for so long I was conditioned to believe that English was enough, that it elevated me above those who struggled with it. This poem exposes that belief as a tragic lie. In attempting to replace our languages with English, we are not merely abandoning words, but we are severing ties with memory, history, and identity. We are complicit in cultural amnesia, and this is the major theme of this poem.

Kagayi’s work reminds us of Toundi’s dying words in Ferdinand Oyono’s *Houseboy*: “Brother, what are we? What are we black men who are called French?” (Oyono 4). In this poem, Kagayi’s speaker becomes Uganda’s Toundi, asking not about the French, but about the English: what are we, who speak English yet forget our own tongues? Through *No Speaking Vernacular*, he issues not just a critique, but a wake-up call; a literary reckoning with language as both wound and weapon, as both loss and possibility. Through lines like, ‘He threatens our civilization’, ‘English

is the language | Of the civilized' (*Speaking* 31), Kagayi compels his readers and audiences to reflect deeply on three intertwined and urgent ideas: language as a site of struggle, identity as a contested inheritance, and cultural memory as a fragile yet vital thread connecting us to who we are and where we come from.

Kagayi also closely engages with the deeply entangled themes of language, identity, and memory in his poem "Before I Am Taxed for My Apology," using verse to confront the silences, erasures, and distortions that continue to haunt postcolonial Ugandan society:

...I'm sorry
For my misery
Because I hate this
English Language too –
This thorny carcass
Gutted in my vocal cords,
piercing my cultural growth,
Injecting me with imported
Misunderstandings of me – ("Apology" 16)

The excerpt above is drawn from a seven-page poem, yet even this small fragment reveals Kagayi's unwavering commitment to the themes of language, identity, and memory. In this poem, Kagayi abandons the satirical tone seen in *No Speaking Vernacular* and instead confronts the issue of language with a raw, unapologetic directness. The speaker's hatred for the English language is not merely emotional; it is deeply rooted in cultural frustration. By likening English to a "thorny carcass," Kagayi evokes a disturbing image of decay and harm, a metaphor that encapsulates the cultural damage inflicted by linguistic colonization. The speaker confesses that English has estranged him from his culture, stifled his growth within it, and blurred the lines of his identity. This is the power of language; not just to communicate, but to shape who we are and how we see ourselves.

Despite the speaker's anger, Kagayi urges reflection. His poetry becomes a space for reckoning, with history, with inherited linguistic ideologies, and with the dangers of cultural amnesia. His warning is not against English itself, but against forgetting our own. This resonates with Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni's decolonial call to "re-member the dismembered", to recover lost languages, identities, and ways of being that colonialism severed. Ndlovu-Gatsheni states:

"How can a 'dismembered' people be 're-membered'? How can they re-launch themselves from the world of 'non-being' into the world of 'being'? How can they recapture their lost land, power, history, being, language and knowledge? These are fundamental decolonial questions crying out for a response. At stake in decolonial thinking is the question of how to understand the impact of colonialism, not as an episode, but as a global process of dismemberment, subjectivisation, domination, control and exploitation." (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 23)

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's question, "*How can a 'dismembered' people be 're-membered'?*" captures the essence of the decolonial struggle. Colonialism, he argues, was not a mere historical episode but a global process of dismemberment that systematically fragmented colonized peoples across multiple dimensions of existence. It dispossessed them of land, stripped them of power, silenced their histories, and undermined their languages and knowledge systems, producing what he calls a "world of non-being" in which African identities were rendered inferior and voiceless (23). This dismemberment was achieved not only through physical conquest but through epistemic control; the imposition of foreign languages, values, and worldviews that alienated Africans from their own heritage.

Kagayi's poetry echoes these questions. It is not a call to arms, but a call to consciousness. He seeks to awaken his readers and listeners to the truth that their languages are not inferior, that civilization does not demand erasure, and that cultural survival begins with linguistic pride. His poems remind us that when we lose our languages, we risk losing our very selves. In this way,

Kagayi's poetry becomes a response to Ndlovu-Gatsheni's decolonial call; a poetic act of remembering the dismembered. Thus, the themes of language, identity, and memory are not incidental; they are the backbone of his poetic vision and central to the decolonial project of reclaiming voice, dignity, and epistemic freedom.

Through his poetry, Kagayi confronts the lingering scars of colonialism by elevating the themes of language, memory, and identity, not as abstract ideas, but as lived experiences by transforming the themes into lived experiences that speak directly to Uganda's postcolonial condition. Rather than treating these as abstract concepts, his poetry draws from collective memory and personal histories to reveal how colonial legacies continue to shape the present. In doing so, he aligns himself with what Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls "pluriversality," a decolonial vision that insists on the coexistence and validity of multiple ways of knowing and being. Ndlovu-Gatsheni reminds us that the crisis of our time is not rooted in ignorance, but in a violent narrowing of thought, the illusion that only Western knowledge is credible, that only Western languages, histories, and systems of meaning are worth preserving ("Discourses" 22). Kagayi's poetry pushes back against this epistemic arrogance. He writes against the grain of monolithic thinking, challenging the deeply embedded belief that English is the only doorway to modernity, success, or intelligence, through pausing serious questions in *No Speaking Vernacular*, as well as other poems.

In this way, Kagayi is not merely writing poetry, he is reshaping the cognitive map of his society using poetry. He is urging his audiences to unlearn the colonial idea that being African means being lesser, and that speaking African languages is a sign of backwardness. Language in Kagayi's poetry is more than a tool of expression; it is a battlefield where the struggle for identity, dignity, and cultural memory is being waged. From this battlefield emerges a new vision, one in which

being Ugandan, being African, and being multilingual is not a deficit, but a source of strength. Language, then, becomes the central artery of his poetic project, because from it flows the very lifeblood of identity and memory.

Kagayi continues to underscore the centrality of language in “Why am I Telling You This in English?”, a poem that interrogates the paradox of conveying African realities in a colonial tongue. In the lines, “How can we think positivity / When positivity is officially carried / In the language of the English” (“English” 39), Kagayi’s speaker articulates the inner conflict of processing reality through a language historically linked to subjugation. The tension deepens in the declaration, “The Constitution, / Our National Law, / ~~Is official in English!~~” (41), a line Kagayi delivers with a strikethrough effect. This visual interruption is powerful and symbolic because it attempts to erase the very fact it simultaneously asserts, which is the fact that the Constitution of Uganda is in English. This signals the poet’s desire to challenge and unwrite the linguistic reality imposed by colonialism. As Ngũgĩ and D. Venkat Rao argue, language carries deep political and artistic weight. Political narratives, they note, must meet “artistic standards” that resonate with oral traditions and strong imagery (Rao and Ngũgĩ 165). Kagayi’s use of satire, metaphor, and visual form marks a conscious aesthetic resistance, one that reclaims African expressive traditions even within the structure of English.

This confrontation with English also provokes a deeper questioning of identity. The Constitution, being only in English, reflects a systemic denial of linguistic and cultural belonging for Ugandans. Kagayi’s speaker exposes how identity becomes fractured when one’s national language is not their mother tongue. Ndlovu-Gatsheni critiques how colonial logic privileged the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum*, “I think, therefore I am”, which positioned Western rationality and language as

superior forms of being (“Internationalisation” 82). For colonized societies, this translated into an internalization of inferiority thus being was only recognized when articulated in English. Kagayi subverts this by posing a simple yet fundamental question: if our laws and knowledge systems are only valid in English, then whose identity are we truly building? By placing this crisis at the heart of his poetry, Kagayi reminds his readers that embracing African languages is not just about communication but it is also about affirming who we are.

Finally, the poem addresses the erasure and recovery of cultural memory. Kagayi’s emphasis on language and identity is inextricably tied to the memory of who we were, what we have forgotten, and what we risk losing. As Dorothy Mosby writes, African-descended communities face *el olvido*, the condition of being forgotten or falling into oblivion (Mosby 20). This forgetting is not just personal but collective and cultural. Kagayi’s poetry fights against *el olvido* by reawakening historical and cultural consciousness. As Mosby adds, memory is “a quest to discover self and community” (24), a journey Kagayi mirrors through his poetic voice. Similarly, Barabash affirms that literature is a tool for restoring “the national-cultural organism” (Barabash 146), which Kagayi does by reminding readers that cultural survival depends on linguistic survival. His poems function as both critique and restoration: they critique the continued colonization of thought through English while restoring dignity and presence to Ugandan languages, cultures, and identities.

Language, memory, and identity are central concerns in Kagayi’s poetry because they confront the lingering shadows of colonialism and pose urgent questions: How does Kagayi utilize indigenous languages to resist the legacy of English dominance? In what ways do his poems recover pre-colonial traditions, folklore, and suppressed cultural values? And how has colonialism disrupted both personal and national identities? Through his poetry, Kagayi engages with these questions

with a strong sense of purpose. His work challenges the erasure of African ways of being by affirming the richness and legitimacy of Ugandan languages and cultural memory. In doing so, Kagayi does more than resist; he reclaims. He reminds Ugandans of who they are, where they come from, and why their languages and cultures are not just relevant but essential to understanding themselves and rebuilding their identities.

5.2. The Weight of Kagayi's Negativity: Poetry as Citizen Protest Against the Misuse of Power

In African poetic imagination, the poet is not a passive dreamer detached from the urgencies of life, but a seer, teacher, and moral conscience of society. As Tanure Ojaide argues, the African poet occupies a prophetic position, “a gauge of his society’s condition,” endowed with insight and responsibility to “report something to his people” and to act as “a defender of the helpless” (Ojaide 84–87). In this context, poetry transcends mere aesthetic contemplation; it becomes a didactic and political tool used to confront injustice, tyranny, and corruption. This view sharply contrasts with Western assumptions like those David Orr discusses, that dismiss poetry as “passive” or “swoony,” disconnected from the gritty realities of politics (Orr 409). In the African tradition, poetry does not retreat from the political sphere; rather, it speaks directly to it, engaging power and exposing its moral failures.

Kagayi’s poetry emerges from this tradition of citizen protest and moral engagement, employing what Ojaide calls the “didactic inclination of the African imagination” to enlighten, criticize, and awaken the conscience of both rulers and the ruled. His verse resonates with the voices of African poets such as Soyinka, Okot p’Bitek, and Osundare, who use satire and prophetic tone to condemn social decay and political betrayal. Kagayi’s “negativity” is therefore not nihilistic; it is a righteous anger, a poetic dissent against the misuse of power, reflecting the historical role of the African

poet as town-crier, teacher, and defender of communal values. Through sharp irony, lament, and confrontation, Kagayi aligns with Ojaide's notion of the poet as "spokesman for the black race," who writes with a desire "to push the world in a certain direction" (Ojaide 87).

This section, therefore, examines how Kagayi's poetry embodies this tradition of resistance, using negative tone, satire, and moral indignation as tools of protest. It argues that his poetic imagination, rooted in African communal consciousness and historical struggle, functions as an ethical intervention in a society marred by corruption, repression, and political disillusionment. To sharpen the conceptualization of "negativity", I note that "negativity" denotes a combination of dissent, refusal to cooperate, political disillusionment, and affective exhaustion.

To say that poetry is passive is to fundamentally misunderstand its power. Poetry may not wield guns or cause physical harm, but it confronts systems, challenges authority, and exposes injustice using words. It wages war against bad governance, corruption, and oppression. This is especially true of Kagayi's poetry, both on the page and on stage, where language becomes a weapon of resistance.

I draw the title of this section from Kagayi's poem *For My Negativity*, a phrase that encapsulates the disillusionment he feels not only in that individual piece but also throughout his entire body of work. Kagayi's poetic voice consistently focuses on exposing what society is often discouraged or even forbidden from discussing: those dark, painful, and complex realities of political governance in Uganda. As we saw in the previous section, Kagayi opens up spaces for critical conversations about language, identity, and memory. In this section, we examine his venture deeper into the political terrain, inviting readers and audiences to interrogate systemic failure, abuse of power, and national trauma. His poetry compels literary scholars to ask questions such as: How are politicians

portrayed? What images or metaphors does he use to challenge corruption? How does his work inspire resistance or civic consciousness? For decolonial thinkers, the questions extend further: How does Kagayi trace contemporary political dysfunction back to colonial legacies? These questions arise organically from the way Kagayi crafts the themes of leadership, political decay, and oppression. His poetic protest is deliberate and unrelenting.

Writing politically in Africa is not just a literary exercise; it is an act of courage. Kagayi's decision to continue writing and performing poetry that critiques power structures is a powerful testament to his protest against silence. His use of poetic style is not only artistic but also strategic, providing him a medium to speak truth to power in a way that navigates the very real dangers of censorship, repression, and retaliation. Therefore, Kagayi's poetry carries the weight of his negativity, it is resistance, and it is survival.

The first poem I will examine in relation to the theme of corruption in Kagayi's work is "For God and My Politicians, Amen". This poem unfolds as a conversation between the speaker and God, and its central theme is developed through a powerful rhetorical question that anchors the entire piece and alludes to the national motto: "For God and my Country," and frames the whole poem in the form of a prayer, which then associates closely with religious language:

...I come to you,
Giver of good health,
To tell you of your people
The politicians left in villages
Who are asking the fire
Of Jjajja ssalongo
A difficult answer
To a simple question
I ask on their behalf:

Is there a heaven for corruption?... ("Amen" 34)

Kagayi's "*For God and My Politicians, Amen*" embodies this activist tradition. Framed as a solemn prayer, the poem employs a religious register with reverent invocations such as "Dear Moulder of life, Giver of wisdom", to secure moral authority even as it indicts political leaders for hypocrisy and greed. The haunting refrain, "*Is there a heaven for corruption?*", forms the poem's rhetorical and emotional center. By juxtaposing the purity and justice symbolized by heaven with the impurity and moral decay of corruption, Kagayi constructs a noticeable irony: a society that normalizes sin while invoking divine sanction. The question's repetition turns piety into protest, parodying the religious language politicians often use to justify exploitation. Through the persona's tone, oscillating between reverence, sarcasm, and lament, the poem dramatizes the spiritual disillusionment of citizens "tired of being tired waiting" for justice. In aligning the sacred with civic accountability, Kagayi transforms prayer into poetic protest, compelling audiences to confront the unsettling truth that divine justice cannot accommodate corruption. His approach affirms Chukwueloka and Ikechukwu's view of poetry as a corrective weapon and realizes Ojaide's vision of the African poet as a moral seer, whose word functions as both sermon and indictment.

This poem echoes the argument advanced by Christian Chukwueloka and Asika Ikechukwu, who describe poetry as a literary weapon whose greatest utility lies in its ability to mock and satirize societal actions, values, and attitudes to correct moral flaws and restore ethical balance (354). Within this view, poetry becomes an instrument of moral rearmament, a means through which the poet seeks to cultivate justice and harmonious coexistence. Similarly, Tanure Ojaide underscores the didactic inclination of the African poetic imagination, describing the poet as "a gauge of his

society's condition" and a "defender of the helpless" whose role is to enlighten and awaken the conscience of the people (Ojaide 84–87).

Ikechukwu further concludes that poetry does more than entertain the mind; it also serves an important social function by teaching and enlightening society. It does so by drawing attention to and mocking visible human weaknesses and immoral behaviors, intending to correct them. In this way, poetry assumes a satirical role: it exposes the flaws of human nature and reveals deeper truths about life, thus promoting both personal and societal transformation (Asika 103). Another poem by Kagayi that significantly supports this view is "This Country is Not Ours, Munange". In this piece, Kagayi's speaker delivers a stark message to the reader that the country in which they live is not theirs.

...if generations come and go,
Why has our history
Remained the same?

Why do we suffer pain
In the same joints
In the same way
Our past has hurt us?... ("Munange" 31)

The irony in this poem is biting. On the surface, it seems to suggest that citizens should "go back to where they came from," echoing the very colonial logic that displaced and dispossessed African people. However, what Kagayi is doing is provoking readers to think about the extent to which their own country has been taken from them, not by foreigners this time, but by their own leaders. The use of the endearing Luganda phrase "Munange" (meaning "my dear" or "my friend") is significant in making a heartfelt lament shared between close companions. In this way, Kagayi's poetry becomes a vehicle for satire, not just by exposing political corruption and social decay, but also by deeply engaging the reader's sense of identity, ownership, and belonging. His poetry

disturbs, questions, and awakens the mind to uncomfortable truths, with the ultimate goal of pushing societal reform.

The speaker in “This Country is Not Ours, Munange” raises urgent and unsettling questions that resonate deeply with decolonial thought. He calls attention to the enduring legacy of colonial suffering and exploitation, suggesting that despite the formal end of colonial rule, little has truly changed. Kagayi’s speaker draws a painful parallel between the past and the present, arguing that the systems of corruption, oppression, and bad leadership initially instituted by colonial powers have not been dismantled. Instead, they have been inherited and perpetuated by African leaders themselves. This continuation of colonial logic is at the heart of decolonial critique, which seeks to interrogate not just the history of colonization but also its lingering influence on postcolonial governance, institutions, and national consciousness. Kagayi’s poetry, therefore, operates as a form of decolonial resistance. It refuses to forget the past and refuses to excuse the present. By exposing how post-independence leadership has mirrored the same violent and exploitative structures of colonialism, Kagayi compels readers to rethink what independence truly means and who the nation really belongs to.

The three themes of corruption, bad leadership, and oppression reappear in Kagayi’s “I Want to Write a Poem”, a poem previously discussed in the section on tone and voice in the previous chapter. In support of poetry’s revolutionary function, I. Ikideh observes that poetry, by its very nature, is a powerful companion to revolutionary movements. Its expressive language and compact form make it an ideal medium for artists who need to deliver urgent messages that provoke emotional and intellectual responses from their audience (Ikideh 167). The speaker expresses an intense desire to write about the state of the nation, but what follows is not the poem itself, but

rather a catalogue of consequences that await those who dare to critique the politics of their country. Kagayi thus cleverly reverses expectations: rather than composing the political poem, he gives voice to the peril of writing one. Through this inversion, Kagayi highlights the censorship, fear, and silencing that often accompany political commentary in Uganda. The final line, “How should I begin?” (“Poem” 54), functions not as a plea for poetic inspiration but as a powerful metaphor for the paralysis felt by those who seek to resist oppression through art. It is a question that shifts the burden of action to the audience, inviting them to imagine and participate in the very revolution that poetry can ignite. In this way, Kagayi’s work embodies Ikideh’s vision of poetry as both a spark and a mirror for political transformation.

Another poem that was previously discussed in the chapter on Kagayi’s performance aesthetics is “In 2065”. On stage, his physical performance, tone, and facial expression amplify the urgency of the message, inviting the audience to see not only what may come but what is already unfolding. The poem offers a scathing critique of leaders who entrench themselves in power while public institutions crumble. Through this dual presentation, both written and performed, Kagayi emphasizes how corruption and oppression are not accidental, but deliberately sustained mechanisms of control. “In 2065” is therefore more than a futuristic speculation; it is a reflection on the lingering legacies of colonial domination, repackaged in postcolonial leadership. The prophetic voice becomes a tool of resistance, allowing Kagayi to expose the failures of governance while urging collective introspection and action.

“In 2065” is the noticeable resemblance between its prophetic imagery and the current political climate in Uganda. When Kagayi published this poem in 2016, the speaker ominously predicted that by 2065, little would have changed, except for his own age and the fact that the president,

though aged and wheelchair-bound, would still be in power, with his son, then imagined as a Field Marshal, ruling by proxy. As we stand in 2025, this grim forecast appears to be materializing. The president remains the same, more than seven years since the poem's publication, which is only a fraction of the decades he has already spent in office. His son, now a General and Chief of Defence Forces in the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), is just a few steps away from attaining the rank of Field Marshal. The idea that he will succeed his father is no longer mere speculation. It is becoming an accepted inevitability, both nationally and internationally, especially considering the breadth of political latitude he enjoys.

The General's recent confrontation with Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, popularly known as Bobi Wine, the current leader of the National Unity Platform (NUP), which has overtaken the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) as the dominant opposition party in Uganda, further confirms Kagayi's foresight. In a disturbing statement, the General publicly boasted about capturing and torturing Bobi Wine's head of security, Mr. Edward Sebuufu, alias Eddie Mutwe, "like a grasshopper," and forcing him to bow to the president's portrait and learn Runyankole, the president's native language (Muia). This chilling admission, rather than being met with accountability, was normalized, illustrating the impunity that often accompanies concentrated political power. This form of power aligns with what decolonial thinkers such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Ngũgĩ refer to as the *coloniality of power* ("Continuing" 32), a persistent structure of domination that outlives formal colonialism and continues to shape political, economic, and cultural life in postcolonial African states. In other words, the relationship between the colonial power and the current political situation in Uganda can be termed as "different name, same darkness".

Such events affirm Kagayi's message in "In 2065": that unless Ugandans and other African citizens recognize and resist these cycles of bad leadership, corruption, and oppression, they will continue well into the future. The poem thus functions as both a warning and a rallying cry. By drawing on historical colonial suffering and linking it to present political realities, Kagayi opens a space for his readers and audiences to reflect critically and act decisively. His prophetic voice, then, is not merely speculative; it is revolutionary. The poem's critique aligns with Ujowundu Cornel's reading of the poetry of Ngozi Chuma-Udeh, who views poetry as a weapon aimed at the ruling elite, those who remain insensitive to the suffering of the masses. For Ujowundu, Chuma-Udeh's poetry is a means of exposing the structural injustices that obstruct true emancipation and of confronting the physical and emotional trauma inflicted by poverty, deprivation, and systemic helplessness (Ujowundu 3). Like Chuma-Udeh, Kagayi uses poetry not just to expose injustice but to awaken a collective consciousness capable of resisting it. His work transforms verse into a battleground where language challenges power and invites society to imagine a future free from inherited oppression.

Kagayi engages with themes surrounding politics through prophecy in his poem "The Headline That Morning". The idea that poets are akin to prophets has long been explored, for example, in the works and reception of Nigerian poet Tanure Ojaide, Sunny Awhefeada, writing for *The Independent*, reiterated this connection in an article announcing Ojaide's conferment of an honorary doctorate in letters. He referenced the ancient Roman belief that poets are prophets and noted that Ojaide's poetry makes this claim evidently true (Awhefeada). Kagayi, too, proves this assertion through poems like "In 2065" and "The Headline That Morning". In the latter, Kagayi crafts a speaker who takes on the role of a news anchor delivering a headline. His poetic speakers are rarely confined to the written page; they are created for performance, intended to animate the

poem in live delivery. This careful alignment of speaker and theme emphasizes Kagayi's performative intent. In his discussion on levels of performance, Don Elger suggests that a performer's growth allows them to embody more complex roles and deliver deeper, resonant messages (Elger 11). Kagayi demonstrates such mastery, inhabiting characters with sociopolitical significance, such as the head teacher in *No Speaking Vernacular!* or the prophet-figure in "In 2065" and "The Headline That Morning".

In the latter, the speaker expresses disillusionment with repeated and meaningless news headlines, describing them as "an empty promise of a dull tomorrow" ("Headline" 60). The poem suggests that Ugandans are caught in a loop of political stagnation, where electoral outcomes and leadership remain unchanged. This repetition is significantly conveyed in the lines:

Then, the headline of that morning
When the presidential results are released
Will be the same headline
As the headline before
Before the headline
Before that headline...("Headline" 61)

Kagayi's "*The Headline That Morning*" employs repetition as its central poetic strategy to dramatize the cyclical monotony of Uganda's political landscape. The persistent refrain, "*The headline that morning,*" structures the poem as a daily lamentation, where each new dawn merely reproduces the failures of the past. This deliberate anaphora creates a rhythmic loop that mirrors the stasis and predictability of governance, "the same headline / as the headline before." Through this linking device, Kagayi exposes a regime where promises of reform dissolve into recycled rhetoric, and where change of leadership becomes "not a mere change of guards" but a reenactment of the same oppressive patterns. Irony intensifies the critique: headlines meant to convey novelty instead chronicle trivialities: miniskirts, pensioners' neglect, and political theatrics at Serena, while

deeper crises of justice and democracy remain unresolved. The poem's tone oscillates between sarcasm and sorrow, culminating in the haunting refrain, "*Let's hope I'm wrong,*" whose hollow optimism underscores the nation's despair. In resonance with Tanure Ojaide's view of the African poet as "a gauge of his society's condition" (Ojaide 84), Kagayi's voice emerges as both chronicler and critic, using repetition, irony, and symbolic imagery to indict tyranny and awaken collective conscience.

These poems exemplify how poetry can serve as a powerful political tool, capable of penetrating silenced spaces and interrogating entrenched power structures that oppress the public. Ezenwa-Ohaeto regards the prophetic dimension of poetry as essential, particularly in his in-depth examination of contemporary Nigerian poetry. He argues that poets are compelled to articulate uncomfortable truths, especially given the prevailing socio-political crises and the pervasive unwillingness of political leaders to engage with reasoned critique (Ohaeto 169). As a result, poets often assume a confrontational and revelatory role, one that frequently disrupts societal comfort and challenges existing authority. Kagayi reinforces the view that poets, akin to prophets, examine the present landscape to forecast the dire consequences that may arise from inaction.

Through his work, Kagayi's poetry delivers both a sense of lamentation and a fervent call to arms, articulating an urgent plea for reform with remarkable poetic precision. One pivotal element in Kagayi's engagement with the themes of abuse of power is the tone with which he delivers his messages. While many of his poems adopt a satirical or sarcastic voice, it is important to recognize that the underlying emotional current driving his writing and performances is often one of anger and disillusionment.

Kagayi's tone, whether experienced through the written word or in live performance, frequently oscillates between biting sarcasm and unmistakable outrage. The poems "Yellow Pupu" and "Give Me Yellow Blood," although not yet performed publicly, serve as vivid examples of this dynamic. On the surface, they may resemble playful children's rhymes, buoyed by rhythm and lyrical energy. However, beneath this lighthearted exterior lies a much deeper and troubling commentary on the state of governance.

The seemingly cheerful repetition of phrases like "yellow blood" or the playful depiction of a country covered in "yellow pupu" masks a harsh critique of political corruption, repression, and authoritarian rule, particularly referencing the color symbolic of Uganda's ruling party. Kagayi employs this sarcasm not merely to entertain but rather to disarm his audience, lulling them into laughter only to prompt a more uncomfortable reflection: Should these harsh realities really be laughed at? In this light, his use of tone becomes a strategic literary device to underscore these unsettling issues. The poems entertain, but they also disturb the reader's sensibilities. The laughter they provoke is often uneasy, and through this tension, Kagayi compels his readers and listeners to confront the absurdity and tragedy inherent in Uganda's political condition.

Thus, even within his most playful works, Kagayi's anger pulses just beneath the surface, amplifying his critique of bad governance, stifled democracy, and systemic oppression in a society yearning for change and accountability. Through his art, he encourages critical reflection, challenging not only the status quo but also urging the public to engage actively in the pursuit of justice and reform.

His anger, channeled through sarcasm, continues in the poem "*Rwakitura Republic Opens!*", a poem that reduces Uganda to someone's home, where Kagayi intensifies his critique of the Ugandan political landscape:

...The Republic of Rwakitura
Was discovered in 1986 by John Speke
And he named it after his big uncle
And mentor Uncle Rwakitura
Who long long long ago fought and defeated
And defecated on the dictator uncle Dada's
Presidential chair which right now
Is in the National Rwakitura Museum Archives...("Rwakitura" 10)

In "*Rwakitura Republic Opens!*", Kagayi deploys camouflage as a satirical weapon, disguising political dissent within the jubilant tone of a national invitation. The poem's festive diction, "cordially invites you," "the food is enough," mimics state propaganda, yet beneath its celebratory façade lies a scathing critique of Uganda's personalized rule and cyclical authoritarianism. Through ironic allusions to colonial explorer John Speke, autocrat Idi Amin, and the metaphorical figure Uncle Rwakitura, Kagayi collapses distinct historical figures into a single lineage of domination and self-glorification. This deliberate conflation underscores the continuity of tyranny from colonial conquest to post-independence governance, suggesting that contemporary leaders merely inherit and perpetuate imperial hierarchies. The grotesque image of "defecating on the dictator uncle Dada's presidential chair" dramatizes the moral contamination of power, implying that the presidential seat itself has become a symbol of corruption. By parodying national rituals, anthems, flags, and coronations, Kagayi dismantles the myth of liberation and exposes the fiction of democracy in a state that functions as a private kingdom. His use of camouflage and historical allusion thus transforms satire into political prophecy, aligning with Tanure Ojaide's view of the

African poet as “a defender of the helpless” (84-87) and echoing the decolonial impulse to unveil the disguised continuities of oppression.

In this poem, the speaker adopts a celebratory tone, mockingly announcing the “opening” of Rwakitura, the President’s home district, as if it were a new, sovereign nation. The exaggerated excitement and performative joy serve to ridicule the excessive personalization of state power, where the lines between public service and private interests are completely eroded. The very idea that the President’s home district could function as a republic is a scathing metaphor for the monopolization of national resources and political control by one family or figure. Here, Kagayi masterfully uses satirical performance to draw attention to political absurdities that have become normalized. His sarcasm is not light-hearted; it is fuelled by deep frustration with the status quo. The poem’s tone, dripping with irony, reinforces the poet’s anger at the transformation of Uganda’s political space into a dynastic enterprise. By celebrating a mock inauguration of a “republic,” Kagayi exposes the erosion of democratic values and the tragic irony of governance in the country. This style, anger veiled in humour, strengthens the subversive power of the poem, allowing it to critique power structures while engaging audiences in a reflective, if uneasy laughter.

This same critique of leadership across the African continent is echoed by Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika, who observes that “the leadership problem of the country, Nigeria, as well as that of many African nations, is one that we have come to realize and recognize. It is on the pages of our daily newspapers and magazines that it is almost becoming boring news” (Asika 113).

He further points out that insensitivity to the plight of the masses is becoming “an idealized style of leadership” in Africa, where political power is synonymous with oppression, division, and the deliberate impoverishment of citizens (Asika 114). This assertion resonates strongly with the tone

and imagery Kagayi employs in “Rwakitura Republic Opens!” to bring out these themes, where he sarcastically celebrates a district as the new center of national authority. Kagayi’s satire is not merely for humour; it is a deliberate artistic strategy to expose how political power has been perverted into a tool for subjugation. Just as Asika points out the normalization of poor leadership as systemic, Kagayi dramatizes this reality on stage and page, turning poetry into a weapon of critique and awakening. Through such pieces, Kagayi becomes a voice of resistance, reminding audiences of the need to reject complacency and recognize satire as a call to action.

In his critical examination of the enduring effects of coloniality, Ndlovu-Gatsheni outlines a comprehensive framework consisting of four interlinked matrices of power that continue to shape the realities of African nations and communities long after the formal end of colonial rule. These matrices include the control over the economy, the exercise of authority, issues of gender and sexuality, as well as the realms of subjectivity and knowledge, all of which remain deeply embedded in the structures of postcolonial governance that have emerged since independence (“Coloniality” 49). The ongoing dispossession of land, the exploitation of labor, and the hegemonic control over natural resources are not merely remnants of a bygone era; they persist vigorously through pervasive systems of corruption and elite capture that undermine genuine democratic progress and socio-economic equity. Furthermore, military superiority and the monopolization of violence serve to reinforce authoritarian rule, effectively silencing opposition and dissenting voices (49). In this context, Western-centric education continues to marginalize indigenous knowledge systems, systematically reconfiguring African identity through a lens of imposed deficiencies and inferiority as outlined in Ndlovu-Gatsheni's analysis.

Kagayi's poetry speaks significantly and directly to this complex entanglement of colonial residues and the contemporary failures of leadership that plague various African states. His poems not only critique the visible injustices stemming from pervasive bad governance but also exposes the deeper, historical, and ideological structures that have long enabled corruption and oppression to thrive within societies. In the next poem, it becomes increasingly clear that Kagayi is not merely reacting to the surface symptoms of political decay; rather, he is engaging in a fundamental interrogation of the enduring colonial logics that continue to legitimize exploitation and systematically silence dissent in contemporary Africa. Through his verse, he challenges the status quo, urging a critical reflection on the historical and ongoing injustices that shape the collective experience of his people.

Kagayi's poem, "These People! These People!", presents a fundamentally direct and serious tone that starkly contrasts with the more satirical elements found in some of his poems. This intensity serves not only as an expression of personal grievance but also as a testament to the widespread anguish felt across Uganda and beyond due to the pervasive corruption that has plagued the nation. In this poem, Kagayi's anger evolves into an outright rage that resonates deeply with the frustrations of many Ugandans, encapsulating a collective outcry against a system that has systematically failed its citizens. The speaker's choice to adopt the first-person perspective fosters a direct connection with the audience, transforming the poem into a performative indictment of the very fabric of a society marred by graft and moral decay. This method serves to heighten the urgency of the message, compelling the audience to not just listen but to actively engage with the narrative being presented.

These people are corrupt I swear!
I saw them with my own eyes!

These people are spiritually bankrupt
These people have leftover brains in their heads
These people bury dogs' skulls in nursery school beds
I saw them with my own eyes! ("People" 17)

The emphatic declaration, "These people are corrupt I swear!" (17), cuts through the complacency of the status quo, starkly emphasizing the speaker's frustration and highlighting the undeniable reality of the corruption that exists at every level of governance. Through this declaration, Kagayi compels the reader to confront their complicity in allowing such vices to flourish unchallenged. He builds upon this confrontation by meticulously detailing the depth of the rot within the political and social institutions, illustrating these individuals as "spiritually bankrupt." This particular line is noticeably evocative, not merely critiquing their moral failings but encapsulating the broader ethical decay that has infiltrated the nation's leadership.

Kagayi's imagery becomes increasingly graphic as he illustrates how these corrupt figures thrive on crime, lining their pockets while undermining the very laws meant to protect the populace. The brutal symbolism captured in the act of "urinating on the Constitution" is emblematic of a fundamental betrayal, an act that starkly reveals their disdain not only for legal frameworks but for the rights and dignity of the Ugandan people. This hyperbolic imagery is not intended solely to shock; rather, it serves a deeper purpose of awakening the readers and audiences to the extent of betrayal perpetrated by those in positions of power. The rage expressed within the poem transcends mere indignation; it mirrors the sentiments articulated by figures such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni, who connect it to a larger decolonial desire, a longing to break free from systemic oppression and cognitive enslavement that continues to impact post-colonial societies. Ndlovu-Gatsheni notes, "The decolonial call is for Africans to free themselves from shackles of coloniality that is pervasive

in the domains of power, knowledge, and being. What is envisioned by decoloniality are African people as active and free makers of their own futures” (“Future” 493).

The decolonial call, as articulated by Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, urges Africans to dismantle the pervasive coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, and to reassert themselves as “active and free makers of their own futures” (493). This imperative recognizes that the afterlives of colonialism continue to manifest in corrupt political systems, epistemic subjugation, and forms of governance that deny citizens agency. Kagayi’s poetry responds directly to this call. Through his poignant compositions, he dramatizes the continuities of colonial domination now embodied in post-independence leadership, exposing how entrenched corruption and moral decay perpetuate a coloniality of power. Yet Kagayi’s vision extends beyond critique; his voice becomes performatively decolonial, urging audiences to reclaim their moral and political agency. He implores Ugandans to reimagine a future grounded in accountability, integrity, and self-determination, a future liberated from both colonial residues and domestic tyranny. In doing so, Kagayi’s work becomes a poetic enactment of decoloniality, translating Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s theoretical vision into a living, performative call to action. His verse insists that liberation is not merely a historical event but a continuous, ethical practice through which citizens must actively shape their destiny in defiance of inherited structures of oppression.

In another poem, “*The Writing on the Wall*,” Kagayi presents a chilling portrait of a democracy in decay, one that can no longer breathe, think, or nourish its people. The poem’s refrain, “Death is the answer,” becomes a desperate response to the suffocating effects of failed leadership. Through violent imagery, teaspoons of blood, bullets offered as bride-price, and houses turned to graffiti (“Wall” 30), Kagayi reflects a society pushed to the brink, where corruption, neglect, and

political indifference breed chaos and disillusionment. This poetic outcry resonates with Ayofemi Achebe's observation that poets in postcolonial Africa often use their work to express frustration with systemic dysfunction while calling attention to the urgent need for reform (Achebe 3). Kagayi's poem transcends mere lament; it becomes a radical act of exposing the grotesque consequences of bad leadership and a hollow democracy that has become the very "cancer" it once promised to cure. In this way, his poetry aligns with the wider tradition of African protest literature that refuses silence in the face of political failure.

The final poem from Kagayi's *Yellow Pupu Poems* collection, titled "That Clock Tower on Entebbe Road," is one that also continues to refuse silence in a country that is politically failing:

‘Send us some soldiers also
To fight the use of vernacular in schools
Some people are now doing
What they call decolonizing themselves!
Mr. Boris, come back and colonize us
I see every day around the clock of the queen
Chinese staring at it from every angle
Mr. Boris, please come back
And colonize us again.
We admit we have failed your project.’ (“Entebbe” 50)

This poem not only uses vivid imagery of colonialism and historical allusions that evoke memories of Uganda's colonial past, but also because of its incisive engagement with themes that decolonial theorists have long interrogated, particularly the persistence of corrupted power structures. Kagayi, through a speaker who ironically pleads with a former colonial power, specifically invoking Boris Johnson, to return and "re-colonize" Uganda, is not expressing nostalgia for colonial rule. Rather, he is drawing a biting comparison between the colonial oppression of the past and the political dysfunction of the present. The speaker's appeal is saturated with irony, underlining the failure of post-independence leadership and exposing the cyclical nature of domination, now perpetuated by

African leaders themselves. This gesture becomes a powerful decolonial critique, echoing Morgan Ndlovu's argument that knowledge itself has become a critical site of colonial entrapment. As Ndlovu notes;

Crafting a different future for the African subject can only be possible when Africans, as victims of global coloniality, begin to understand the nature of their entrapment in the colonial structure of knowledge within which they exist as objects of deceit, oppression and exploitation (110).

Kagayi's speaker, in recognizing that the current state resembles colonial rule, indirectly calls attention to this epistemic entrapment and the urgent need for decolonial awakening. In this way, "That Clock Tower on Entebbe Road!" masterfully brings together the core themes of power, memory, and knowledge as political tools. It is also important to note that Kagayi often interconnects his poems, creating a larger web of meaning across collections. For example, in *No Speaking Vernacular*, he revisits the theme of linguistic repression, also alluded to in "That Clock Tower on Entebbe Road!", which, in my view, suggests that this earlier poem may have served as an ideological seed for the later and more developed performance poem *No Speaking Vernacular*. Such internal intertextual echoes reflect Kagayi's evolving decolonial thought, where small poetic hints grow into comprehensive critiques. His ability to trace recurring injustices through satire, irony, and historical memory positions him as both a poet and a decolonial thinker.

This poem, "That Clock Tower on Entebbe Road!" positioned at the end of the collection, functions almost as a summative metaphor, anchoring the reader in a specific symbol within Uganda's capital city that resonates with historical memory, political critique, and urban stagnation. The Clock Tower, often passed by and overlooked, becomes a poetic monument through which Kagayi reflects on the enduring state of the nation. Its presence on Entebbe Road, a route synonymous with government travel, political power, and elite access (leading to the State

House), makes it an apt symbol for what has become static and unchanging in Uganda's political trajectory. This reflects a problematic form of nostalgia, one that idealizes the colonial past, suggesting that the present conditions are scarcely distinguishable from those of the colonial era. The speaker, with a mixture of tongue-in-cheek nostalgia and criticism, calls attention to the way the Tower seems to witness everything yet remains unmoved, timeless, but not in a celebratory sense. It becomes an embodiment of suspended progress, marking time in a country where change is promised but perpetually deferred. Kagayi's choice to close the collection with this piece is deliberate: it leaves readers with a lasting image of a nation trapped in repetition, inviting them to reflect not just on the content of the poems but on their own role in the collective struggle for transformation.

The prominence of political themes such as bad leadership, systemic corruption, and state-sponsored oppression in Kagayi's poetry justifies the poet's anxiety about the state of the post-independent African nations, such as Uganda. Through his politically charged poems, Kagayi reveals a sobering reality shared by many postcolonial African states: although formal independence was achieved, the oppressive structures of governance often persisted, merely changing hands from colonial to local rulers. His poetry underscores that true decolonization goes beyond the removal of colonial powers. It demands political justice, transparency, and accountability from those who lead. In doing so, Kagayi situates himself within a lineage of African poets who use their voices not only to remember the past but to demand a better political future.

5.3. Disrupted Lives: Social Injustice, Marginalization, and the Common Citizen

This section shifts focus from political leaders to the ordinary citizens, those who bear the brunt of systemic injustice in Uganda. It seeks to explore how Kagayi represents the struggles of the poor, women, youth, and rural communities. This section is crucial because it reveals that Kagayi's poetry extends beyond critiques of political leadership; it also portrays the lived realities of those at the periphery of power. Even when embedded within politically themed poems, these narratives of suffering and resilience highlight another form of decolonization, one that centers the voices, experiences, and agency of the ignored and voiceless in the national discourse.

In his thought-provoking reflections on the societal role of poetry, Michael O'Siadhail challenges what he perceives to be a narrow binary understanding of poetry's purpose. Traditionally, many have held the view that poetry serves either a political function or, conversely, is merely sentimental and devoid of real substance. O'Siadhail dismantles this false dichotomy, urging readers and critics alike to transcend these limiting frameworks. He posits that poetry possesses fundamental meaning and power within a broad spectrum of thematic explorations, which extends far beyond overt political engagement or the simplistic expression of emotions (O'Siadhail 2). I find significant merit in O'Siadhail's argument, particularly in the Ugandan context, where social issues, including love, gender, sexuality, and the everyday experiences of ordinary people, are often relegated to the periphery of recognized poetic strength, besides a few poetic figures like Okot p'Bitek and Timothy Wangusa, among others. This perspective produces a disservice to the multifaceted nature of human experience, where political issues, while undeniably important, coexist with and influence these delicate human themes.

In my exploration of contemporary Ugandan poetry, it becomes evident that poets like Kagayi embody the complexity of recognizing the need to address a multitude of social concerns alongside political critiques. His work often gives voice to the marginalized, revealing the personal costs associated with poor governance and systemic injustices. Therefore, Kagayi adeptly illustrates how social issues are frequently intertwined with the political landscape. His poignant observations remind us that the lived realities of ordinary Ugandans, who face myriad struggles daily, are not separate from the political machinations that govern their lives. Themes of poverty, inequality, and disenfranchisement resonate deeply with his verses, affirming the notion that engaging with these themes is, in itself, a vital political act. Kagayi's poetry serves as both a mirror and a challenge to society, encouraging us to confront the weight of these realities and their implications for social justice.

One of the most persistent themes present in Kagayi's work is the burden of excessive taxation imposed on Ugandan citizens, a pressing issue that disproportionately impacts the common man. In Uganda today, countless individuals grapple with an income that barely meets their basic needs, compounded by the strain of heavy taxation that continuously diminishes their already meager earnings (Busein). This situation plunges many deeper into financial distress, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities within society. Kagayi skillfully employs the technique of hyperbole to critique this injustice, using exaggeration not to incite laughter, but rather to highlight the sheer gravity of the problem at hand. In his politically charged poem "In 2065," he envisions a future Uganda where taxation has reached such an extreme:

U.R.A will be taxing the air we breathe,
The many times couples kiss,
The fart we excrete,
The words we speak

And the way we die
And will determine those who go to heaven
And those to hell
And tax their corpses differently. (“2065” 56)

The state begins to levy taxes on the very air citizens breathe, the small gestures of affection shared between couples, and even the gas expelled from their bodies. While undeniably exaggerated, these images serve as a powerful commentary on the realities of economic exploitation, inviting readers to reflect on the loss of dignity that comes with relentless taxation. This noticeable use of satire compels the audience to confront the pervasive social and economic injustices that often become normalized within public discourse.

Moreover, through his art, Kagayi cultivates a fundamental connection to the Ugandan experience, articulating the urgent need for citizens to critically evaluate how their taxes are utilized and who ultimately benefits from such fiscal policies. His work serves not only as a form of artistic expression but as an indictment of a system that exploits individuals at every level, a theme that resonates deeply with audiences who feel the weight of these concerns in their daily lives and perhaps compels them to reflect on what is happening to them.

In another poem, “These People! These People!”, Kagayi revisits the oppressive theme of taxation, linking it with the corrupt individuals who perpetuate this cycle of exploitation.

These people tax poverty, poor health, suicide resorts
These people tax Unemployment
And ignorance in ignorance combined
These people tax unborn babies
These people tax dead bodies... (“People” 17)

Here, he once again employs hyperbole as a rhetorical device to shed light on the absurdities of systemic corruption, accusing the unscrupulous of taxing not only the poor, unhealthy, and

unemployed but even unborn infants and the deceased themselves. Such exaggerations, while they may first spark laughter, ultimately reveal a tragic truth about a system that extracts resources at the expense of the most vulnerable. The imagery that permeates Kagayi's work underscores the relentless pressure placed on populations already burdened by hardship, seamlessly illustrating how corruption intensifies their suffering.

The insights of Sherri Torjman serve as a compelling lens through which we can interpret Kagayi's poignant interventions. She argues that poetry can transcend mere words; it can offer soulful, dignified, and human-centered approaches to grappling with issues of poverty and social injustice (Torjman 8). Torjman calls for a departure from sterile, technocratic solutions, advocating instead for approaches anchored in empathy, authenticity, and fervent engagement. Kagayi's voice resonates significantly within this framework, as he embodies the role of the poet as an amplifier of marginalized voices, articulating grievances that many within society may feel too afraid or powerless to express. His poetry rises as a form of resistance against systemic injustice, functioning as a decolonial act that not only critiques oppressive structures but also invites audiences to acknowledge their suffering and take active steps toward reclaiming their agency and dignity within the community. Ultimately, through his poignant and deeply personal poetry, Kagayi encapsulates the struggle for justice in Uganda, illustrating how addressing social injustices is not merely a political necessity but a fundamental aspect of human dignity.

Kagayi's fundamental poetic concern for the plight of the common person unfolds with haunting clarity in his five-part poem titled "Location." It begins with an incredibly unsettling and deeply emotive line: "I was there when Uganda died." ("Location" 23). This stark declaration ushers in an atmosphere laden with mourning, compelling Ugandan readers to face the collective national

trauma that the speaker is about to recount, forcing them to grapple with the echoes of their shared suffering and loss.

In the subsequent parts of the poem, Kagayi meticulously outlines the harrowing causes of this metaphorical death, illuminating the painful erosion of national identity and the monstrous massacres that ensnared innocent lives in places like Kasese, Luweero, and Mukura, grim locations he hauntingly designates as “killing fields.” These allusions are far more than mere historical references; they serve as urgent reminders that the specters of violence and marginalization persist, weaving themselves into the very fabric of Uganda's present reality. With relentless fervor, Kagayi brings forth the issue of heavy taxation, underscoring its centrality to the daily agonies experienced by Ugandans and revealing its role as a catalyst in the deepening of systemic suffering that suffocates the populace.

The prophetic mode of the poem introduces a gravitas that is difficult to bear, projecting a dystopian vision of a nation besieged by social injustice, poised on the brink of succumbing to its own self-inflicted wounds. However, what renders “Location” noticeably heartbreaking are its final two sections. Here, the speaker encounters a figure who bears a smile, and with a heavy heart, questions the appropriateness of such a gesture amidst the backdrop of national upheaval because “I was there when my country died” (24). This poignant moment reverberates deeply within the soul, especially when considered in light of Kagayi’s satirical works, which often wield laughter as a subversive weapon against oppressive power structures. In contrast, “Location” strips away the veil of satire, leaving behind an unvarnished portrayal of raw grief and despair.

In this fundamental moment of reckoning, the poet directly addresses his audience, issuing a solemn warning against the dangers of passive amusement. He implores them to set aside mirth

and instead embrace sorrow, urging a recognition of the pain that has, through time, become all too normalized. The poem transforms into an emotional plea, merging the weight of sorrow and the urgency for reflection, not for smiles or frivolous laughter, but for a collective mourning, a shared moment of introspection, and ultimately, an awakening from the slumber of indifference. This fundamental emotional charge, however, does not preclude the presence of satire in Kagayi's broader poetic repertoire. Contrary to Lockwood's assertion that modern writers face a strict dichotomy, "either to be a poet and not a satirist, or else a satirist and not a poet—but not both" (Lockwood 402). Kagayi's work resists such rigid categorization. In poems such as "*Location*", we witness the gravity and seriousness of poetic mourning, while in others, satire becomes a weapon of critique. Kagayi proves that one can mourn and mock, indict and inspire all within the frame of poetry.

Beyond the issue of taxation, Kagayi presents another critical social concern that directly reflects the suffering within Ugandan society: the crisis of irresponsible parenthood. In the poem "Stand Up and See", Kagayi delivers an unflinching critique of modern parenting through vivid imagery and dramatic monologue. The speaker invites readers to "stand up and see" the failures of parents whose choices and lifestyles compromise the well-being of their children:

...Stand up and see the parent of today
The Mrs 'Motherhood-doesn't-mean-I-should-lock-myself-in-this-marriage!'
Hopping from work to a nightclub
A mother of three at a nightclub at three a.m.
Stand up and see how she gets drunk
How she spends more time with her mirror
While Mr. 'I-am-too-busy-working-so-my-kids-can-have-a-better-life!'
Pontificates his parenting
By buying the children gifts to buy their affection
Stand up and see how these children will turn out
After wasting their childhood
And pretending to live the adulthood... ("Stand" 47).

In this excerpt, Kagayi passionately illuminates the fundamental neglect, careless indifference, and self-justifying excuses that plague the parenting failures within contemporary Ugandan society. He eschews traditional naming conventions for these parental figures, choosing instead to define them through their toxic behaviors and rationalizations; we encounter the figures of “Mrs. 'Motherhood-doesn't-mean...’” and “Mr. 'I-am-too-busy...’” This deliberate stylistic choice serves to highlight stark societal patterns that overshadow individual failings, emphasizing a collective crisis that demands urgent attention. The labeling also implies that the parents have taken on stereotypical roles and have therefore forfeited the humane and intimate relationship of individual parent to individual child.

The poem delivers a scathing indictment of mothers who recklessly prioritize nightlife, superficial appearances, and personal indulgence at the expense of nurturing their children. Likewise, it casts a critical eye on fathers who mistakenly believe that mere economic provision can replace the rich tapestry of emotional presence and moral guidance that every child desperately needs. Through these searing observations, Kagayi challenges us to reflect on the damaging implications of such dereliction of duty. Kagayi’s tone is unapologetically confrontational, a clarion call that cuts through complacency. Unlike his previous satirical works, this piece starkly rejects humor; instead, it presents a direct, urgent, and emotionally charged message to parents everywhere, as well as to the community. It commands and implores to stand up and see. He warns that their pervasive neglect threatens to yield a generation of deeply scarred youth, children who will, all too soon, navigate adulthood burdened by addiction, moral bewilderment, and a troubling misalignment of priorities.

Kagayi does more than just expose societal decay; he endeavors to ignite a fire of self-reflection and instill accountability among parents. “Stand Up and See” emerges as both a resonant lament for lost potential and a passionate wake-up call, harmonizing with Kagayi’s broader decolonial project that courageously challenges not only entrenched societal systems but also the personal practices that contribute to the pervasive social suffering in our midst. It is a fierce reminder that the future of our children hangs in the balance, calling on us all to rise to the occasion and take responsibility for nurturing a brighter tomorrow. While Akingbe notes that contemporary Nigerian poetry often addresses moral corruption through vivid satire, particularly targeting the obsession with wealth and materialism (Akingbe 199), Kagayi’s approach in “Stand Up and See” diverges in tone and focus. Rather than relying on satire alone, Kagayi blends lamentation with confrontation, moving beyond ridicule to evoke a sense of moral urgency and emotional accountability. His critique is intimate and direct, rooted in a call for transformative action rather than distant mockery.

In another poem, “If It Is Yours, Touch It!”, Kagayi confronts the deeply rooted issue of gendered bodily violence within African societies.

You man, you’re bold!
Because I’m walking past you
You think my body is your pet
Your hands can tap whenever
– And wherever – they desire?
How dare you touch me – me, without my permission?
How dare you even giggle? (“Touch” 41)

The poem centers a female speaker who resists patriarchal entitlement to her body, shifting Kagayi’s typical poetic voice from speaking for the affected to humanizing the characters themselves in a more intimate, first-person resistance. In this moment, the speaker becomes a

powerful embodiment of feminist consciousness, denouncing the man who touches her without consent. Her rage, captured in the capitalized rhetorical cry “HOW DARE YOU?”, represents a broader revolt against the normalized violations of women’s autonomy. Her insult, calling the man “forgotten in civilization”, underscores the disconnect between modern ideals of gender equity and lingering patriarchal ideologies. Kagayi aligns himself with the project of feminist decoloniality, where speaking against such bodily violations is part of the greater dismantling of oppressive systems inherited from both colonial and indigenous patriarchal structures.

This engagement mirrors the feminist literary tradition exemplified by Ama Ata Aidoo, whose novel *Changes: A Love Story* foregrounds the social and psychological realities of African women. As Nada Elia explains, Aidoo’s focus is not merely on romantic entanglements but on “the various aspects of women’s lives,” especially their “internal landscape” and evolving feminist awareness (Elia 138). Kagayi, too, crafts a woman whose voice transcends mere reaction. It represents a form of self-assertion and intellectual clarity that challenges the colonial-patriarchal status quo. Moreover, in a conversation with Nana Wilson-Tagoe, Aidoo insightfully observes that “the female... is the most contested element outside the male,” viewed as a potential threat when she operates beyond her “prescribed traditional spaces” (Wilson-Tagoe 47). Kagayi’s speaker embodies this threat: a woman who refuses to be silenced, organized, or controlled. Her voice represents a radical feminist defiance against the surveillance and regulation of female bodies, and he does this in several poems.

In this sense, “If It Is Yours, Touch It!” is not just a poem about personal violation; it is a site of resistance. Kagayi decolonizes poetic space by allowing a woman to articulate her pain and claim her power. He refuses to let her be the object of the gaze or the background of a larger male-

centered narrative. Instead, she is the story. The poem thus becomes a nexus of feminism, postcolonial critique, and decolonial theory, echoing Aidoo's assertion that women's existence itself is a revolutionary presence. For a Ugandan woman reader, this poem is not only powerful; it is affirming. It gives voice to the silenced and recognizes their anger, not as irrational or shameful, but as necessary, dignified, and decolonial.

The poems analyzed above demonstrate that Kagayi's poetry transcends mere critique of political authority to delve into broader structures of power, including patriarchy, systemic social injustice, and the everyday marginalization experienced by ordinary Ugandans. Kagayi does not just speak truth to political power; he exposes the layered burdens that press upon the shoulders of the powerless. His poetry gives voice to those silenced by systems of inequality, from women facing gendered violence to children neglected by society and parents alike. In this way, his work functions as both a social mirror and a call to action, inviting readers and audiences alike to reflect deeply and critically on the structures that shape their lives. By centering the perspective of the common person, Kagayi crafts poetry that is unapologetically rooted in local realities yet resonant with global struggles for justice and dignity. His work insists that poetry is not merely for aesthetic appreciation but is a radical, living art form capable of awakening social consciousness and inspiring collective transformation.

5.4. Decolonizing 'Mr. Tomorrow': Hope, Agency, and the Future

Kagayi's work, characterized by powerful diction and a palpable sense of urgency, addresses critical themes such as politics, power, social injustice, and the marginalization of the common person. However, what renders Kagayi's poetry particularly compelling is his unwavering belief in the possibility of hope, even when delivering searing critiques of societal injustices. Central to

his work is the idea that poetry serves as a potential catalyst for decolonial thought and action. In a world often dominated by colonial legacies that perpetuate inequality and societal divides, Kagayi's verse becomes a space for imagining alternate futures that challenge colonial and post-independence narratives. His poetry implicitly argues for the liberation of voices that have historically been suppressed in post-colonial contexts. He believes in the transformative potential of poetry, not only as a means to expose societal ills but also as a framework that allows individuals to envision a just world rooted in equity and respect for all.

Through his written work and performances, Kagayi creates both textual and performative spaces where readers and audiences are encouraged to engage in critical self-reflection regarding their realities. This reflective process is not merely an intellectual exercise; it becomes a call to action, urging individuals to recognize their power and responsibility in effecting change within their communities. Thus, his poetry functions not only as a form of resistance against the remnants of colonial oppression but also as a clarion call for renewal and collective action.

As Sigurd Tenningen aptly observes, “poetry is always a search for new beginnings” (Tenningen 101–102). Kagayi’s verse embodies reaching out even in its most critical moments to envision a better future, one that embraces the diverse narratives and histories of his readers, his audiences, his country, and the broader tapestry of socially conscious poets. His commitment to this vision resonates deeply with the principles of decoloniality, which seeks to dismantle the structures of power and knowledge rooted in colonial histories.

This connection is reminiscent of South African performance poet Mzwakhe Mbuli, whose defiant and courageous verse stood as a powerful opposition to apartheid and corruption. Kagayi wields his poetry as both a weapon for justice and a voice for the voiceless. These poets exemplify a rich

tradition of using poetic expression as a tool for social and political transformation, demonstrating that poetry is indeed a powerful force for change, capable of dismantling colonial ideologies and paving the way for a more just and equitable society. Through their art, they assert that decolonization is not merely a political process, but also a deeply cultural and artistic one, where voices of the marginalized reclaim their narratives and envision a world free from the shackles of oppression.

This section examines the visionary and optimistic facets of Kagayi's poetry, which serve as a vital complement to his sharp and poignant critique of the societal structures within Uganda. While a significant portion of his oeuvre resonates with themes of lamentation, resistance, and a fundamental sense of anger directed toward the entrenched socio-political injustices plaguing his homeland, there emerge moments of daring optimism where he allows himself to dream, albeit briefly, of a transformed Uganda. These instances illuminate the essence of Kagayi's vision for social change, justice, and freedom. His poetry not only lays bare the societal wounds inflicted by systemic oppression, but it also extends a hand toward the possibilities of healing and renewal. Through the lens of his verse, one is significantly compelled to reflect on how Kagayi envisions transformation amidst the chaos.

Furthermore, he raises crucial questions regarding the pathway available for the youth: What specific actions does he propose they undertake? In his work, we encounter symbols of hope and renewal that pierce through the darkness. Thus, these inquiries become the guiding light as we engage with Kagayi's more forward-looking poetry. In his artful craftsmanship, he does not merely present a critique of the current societal landscape; rather, he constructs a tentative yet poignant blueprint for what the future could hold. This duality within his work invites readers and scholars

alike to ponder the intersection of despair and hope, all while challenging us to consider our role in the continuum of change. In essence, Kagayi's poetry offers not only a reflective examination of the present but also a hopeful vision that beckons us toward action and engagement in the pursuit of a better tomorrow.

Kagayi's vision of hope, agency, and the future is best captured in his poem, "The Ballad of New Beginnings". This poem marks a significant shift in Kagayi's thematic focus, moving from lamentation to aspiration, and from critique to constructive vision.

...Fate in the hands of Fate;
No more lamentations of our ugly past-
No more fear for the bullet in the gun-
No more hatred for man,
No more fighting;
The time if for healing
Refilling, rethinking
Revisiting, remembering... ("Ballad" 72)

Unlike his prophetic works, such as "In 2065", which predict Uganda's descent into political dysfunction and social despair, this poem envisions a peaceful, healed, and just Uganda. The inherent hope is already conveyed in part of the title, "ballad," which is traditionally associated with narrative and musical beauty, coupled with "new beginnings," which invokes imagery of rebirth and renewal. In this work, Kagayi does not forecast doom; instead, he envisages a nation where citizens are liberated from the fear of the army and where the enduring legacy of colonial and postcolonial trauma is confronted and ultimately transcended. Kagayi offers a moment of poetic imagining: not what is, or what will be from what is, but what can be.

The redemptive power of poetry evident in this work aligns with Carl Leggo's assertion that poetry serves four critical functions: it can heal, teach, show the way, and linger (Leggo 351–365). "The

Ballad of New Beginnings” embodies all four functions. It heals by restoring hope in the collective psyche of a traumatized nation; it teaches by providing insights into Uganda’s past and present injustices, illustrating how cycles of pain might be broken; it shows the way by promoting civic awareness and social action rooted in hope rather than despair; and it lingers, poetically traversing colonial, postcolonial, and imagined post-postcolonial timelines, maintaining memory while articulating future possibilities.

Kagayi's poetry transcends mere critique of the present; it represents what decolonial theorists might consider a “pluriversal” vision (“Internationalisation”⁹¹), one that resists accepting a singular, imposed future of ongoing oppression and instead allows for the imagining of alternative futures grounded in justice, peace, and self-determination. He presents his readers with a choice between two futures: a dystopian reality marked by apathy, as depicted in “In 2065”, and a utopian vision arising from collective action and national healing, as envisioned in “The Ballad of New Beginnings”.

This creative tension between despair and hope resonates fundamentally with David St. John’s powerful reflections on poetry’s role in contemporary society. St. John articulates:

Poetry today is not a superfluous cultural artifact, not an irrelevant luxury of the highly educated. Poetry is a web woven of a resilient, mirrored fiber spun from all of our voices, all of our languages. Each time we speak within a poem, it ripples with reflections, our own and others', showing us the prismatic face of hope; and in its voice, we can hear too the echo that is the future, which speaks, as poetry must, with the fragile but luminous grammar of possibility. (St. John 273)

This "luminous grammar of possibility" encapsulates what Kagayi expresses in “The Ballad of New Beginnings”. His poetry serves as a prismatic lens through which the audience is invited to engage with the past and present while simultaneously envisioning and articulating a hopeful

narrative for Uganda's future. In this manner, Kagayi underscores poetry's enduring significance in shaping national consciousness as a form of resistance against oppressive forces and a powerful tool for reconstruction and creation. Poetry becomes an instrument of transformation, empowering individuals and communities to reimagine their identities and futures. Rather than being confined to mere critique, it opens spaces for dialogue, healing, and achievable aspirations, reflecting the resiliency and potential of the human spirit. Through his work, Kagayi affirms that poetry is not only a reflection of societal struggles but also a catalyst for change and a beacon illuminating the path toward a just and hopeful future.

Kathleen Baker Connolly and Nicholas Mazza argue that writing is a powerful tool for making sense of difficult life experiences (Connolly and Mazza 153). In this context, Kagayi's poetry serves as a fundamental embodiment of this argument. Through its engaged exploration of socio-cultural and political realities, his work not only exposes the myriad challenges faced by ordinary Ugandans but also assists audiences and readers in processing these experiences with renewed understanding and emotional resonance. His poetry, particularly the poignant verses that imagine hopeful futures, imparts emotional and psychological meaning to suffering by suggesting, with conviction, that meaningful change is indeed possible. For instance, Kagayi's poem, "The Ballad of New Beginnings", stands as a compelling example of this intrinsic hope that permeates his writing. It is a significant piece that invites readers to reflect on the potential for transformation in their lives and society. However, Kagayi's optimistic vision continues to unfold in another poem, "When I Wake Up, Mr Tomorrow", a poem that has notably inspired the heading of this subsection.

When I wake up Mr Tomorrow, when I wake up
I want to find my shoes polished,

My shirt and trousers pressed to P  p   Kall   perfection,
My bathing water warm,
And my breakfast ready for religious consumption
Because, I want to tell you,
These days
Have been hard for one Ugandan
And I deserve a happy tomorrow. (“Tomorrow” 74)

In “When I Wake Up, Mr Tomorrow”, Kagayi once again conjures an image of a better country by addressing the future with an open heart and direct engagement. Through the personification of the future as “Mr Tomorrow,” he endows it with both agency and accountability, effectively turning it into a character within his poetic narrative. Kagayi instructs Mr Tomorrow to prepare for his waking: to polish his shoes, iron his clothes, heat his bathing water, and serve breakfast. At first glance, these seemingly mundane domestic tasks may appear trivial; however, when placed within the poetic context, they blossom into fundamental metaphorical representations of pressing national issues. Each item, shoes, clothes, bathing water, and breakfast, transcends its literal meaning, evolving into powerful symbols of the systemic problems that plague the nation, including governance, infrastructure, dignity, and livelihood.

By demanding that these items be in perfect condition, Kagayi transcends individual concerns to express a broader societal yearning. He firmly insists on the image of a well-organized, just, and peaceful Uganda, where individuals can thrive rather than merely survive. Thus, the poem transforms into a metaphorical blueprint for national transformation, where personal order and well-being mirror the political and social stability that is so desperately needed in the country.

This poetic gesture of envisioning transformation not only illustrates Kagayi’s artistic vision but also reinforces the idea that poetry can serve as a therapeutic and restorative tool in times of turmoil. Daneshwar Sharma, in his reflection on the global role of poetry during the COVID-19

pandemic, affirms that poetry proved capable of assisting individuals in confronting trauma and regaining balance and serenity in the face of a crisis (Sharma 12). Kagayi's powerful poems in this section resonate deeply with that same inherent therapeutic power. While his earlier works candidly critique the brutality of state violence, endemic corruption, and social injustices, these two poems, "The Ballad of New Beginnings" and "When I Wake Up, Mr Tomorrow", emerge as beacons of emotional relief, political clarity, and visionary optimism. They stand as poems of healing that not only acknowledge the pain of the past but also affirm the possibility of a brighter, more hopeful Uganda.

Kagayi concludes "When I Wake Up, Mr Tomorrow" with a bold and noticeable declaration: "And Uganda deserves a happy tomorrow." This line resonates significantly as an unwavering command. It carries the tone of urgency and finality, revealingly expressing the collective exhaustion of a population that has endured generations of oppression and struggle. The speaker, embodying both his voice and that of the citizenry, resolutely refuses to accept the status quo. He insists that meaningful change is well overdue and that the time for transformation is now. In this way, Kagayi effectively turns poetry into a political act, reimagining a space where critique is matched by a constructive vision for the future.

In this section, it becomes increasingly clear that Kagayi's poetic project is not merely limited to diagnosing Uganda's myriad ills. He also seeks to inspire genuine transformation and hope amongst his readers. Through poems such as "The Ballad of New Beginnings" and "When I Wake Up, Mr Tomorrow", he wholeheartedly embraces the role of a visionary artist. There are other poems in which he does this, although these are being offered as an example. He offers his readers a vibrant path forward, one where Ugandans are empowered to reclaim their agency, their cultural

identity, and their hope for a better tomorrow. Through his powerful and evocative poetry, Kagayi thus crafts a vivid narrative that serves not only as an instrument of resistance but also as a means of re-imagining the nation itself, filled with possibilities and strength.

5.5. Conclusion

Ndlovu-Gatsheni identifies three core components of decolonial theory: the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being (“Decolonization” 128–130). These interrelated aspects underpin the colonial domination that remains after formal colonization ends. Kagayi’s poetry directly addresses these forms of coloniality by engaging with themes such as language, memory, identity, poor leadership, corruption, oppression, social injustice, marginalization, hope, agency, and future possibilities. Each of these themes not only mirrors the realities faced in postcolonial Uganda but also challenges the enduring impact of colonial systems. Thus, Kagayi’s body of work is part of a broader decolonial initiative aimed at dismantling the colonial power structure, revaluing indigenous knowledge, and restoring dignity to those affected by colonialism.

At its essence, decoloniality explores the lasting effects of colonialism, especially how power, knowledge, and identity continue to reflect colonial ideologies. Kagayi achieves this not only through his written words but also through performance, where his physical presence serves as a space for resistance and reclamation. His poetry acts as both a cultural artifact and a political tool, serving as a means of critique, healing, and envisioning a liberated future. Thus, it is crucial to recognize that Kagayi leverages poetry not only as a form of art but also as a radical socio-political instrument. His contributions to the ongoing decolonial movement awaken consciousness, nurture collective memory, and envision a Uganda freed from colonial and neo-colonial influences.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.0. Introduction

This study set out to critically explore how the written and performed poetry of Kagayi engages with Uganda's socio-cultural and political landscape. Central to this undertaking was the desire to understand how poetry can function as a potent medium of resistance, memory, and re-imagination within postcolonial spaces. The research was guided by a noticeable gap in scholarly attention to the work of poets of Kagayi's generation of spoken word poets in Uganda as a site of both literary artistry and political engagement. While written poetry has received its fair share of critical inquiry, the lived, embodied, and affective dimensions of performed verse, particularly in the works of contemporary poets like Kagayi, Jason Ntaro, Bridget Ankunda, Angel Kabera, among others have remained relatively under-examined. This study, therefore, sought to investigate how Kagayi's poetry, both on the page and stage, acts as a performative text that not only critiques societal injustices but also proposes alternative narratives for collective identity and national healing.

The justification for the study lies in the recognition that African poetry, especially in its performed form, cannot be fully appreciated through purely textual lenses. It demands frameworks that attend to orality, embodiment, and the lived realities from which such art emerges. Kagayi's work challenges readers and audiences to confront Uganda's lingering colonial residues, especially in education, language policy, and political governance, while simultaneously invoking indigenous epistemologies and community-based narratives as tools of decolonial restoration.

To engage with these complex dimensions, this research employed two interwoven theoretical frameworks: Performance Theory and Decolonial Theory. Performance Theory offered a lens through which to understand poetry not as a static artifact but as a dynamic, lived event that unfolds

in real time, in front of and in dialogue with an audience. It enabled a reading and watching of Kagayi's poetry as an embodied and communal practice that transcends textual confines. In addition, Decolonial Theory, particularly the insights of Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, provided a critical vocabulary for unpacking how Kagayi's poetry resists the entrenched structures of coloniality that persist in post-independence Uganda. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's arguments about coloniality of being, power, and knowledge resonated deeply with Kagayi's poetic calls for reclaiming indigenous voices, vernacular languages, and socially just systems of governance.

This research demonstrates an integrated analytical movement across its chapters in which Kagayi's written and performed poetry are shown to operate as mutually reinforcing modes of decolonial expression. While the analysis of written poetry reveals how language, imagery, tone, and structure encode political critique at the level of the text, the performance-based chapters illustrate how embodiment, voice, gesture, and audience interaction activate and intensify that critique within lived social space. Read together, the chapters establish that Kagayi's poetry does not merely describe colonial and postcolonial violence but actively performs resistance against coloniality, particularly through the reclamation of suppressed languages, memories, and bodies. The dissertation, therefore, advances a theoretical positioning of performance poetry as a decolonial praxis and, methodologically, demonstrates the necessity of combining close reading with performance analysis in the study of contemporary African poetry. By bridging literary criticism and performance studies within a decolonial framework, the study contributes an interdisciplinary model for analysing African spoken word poetry as both textual art and embodied political intervention.

6.1. Major Conclusions

Chapter One laid the foundational groundwork for this study by offering a comprehensive background on the evolution of African poetry, tracing its journey from oral traditions to written forms, and more recently, to the vibrant resurgence of performance and spoken word poetry. This contextual overview helped to situate performance poetry not as a contemporary novelty but as a continuation and reinvention of long-standing African aesthetic and cultural traditions. The chapter also introduced the emergence of spoken word in contemporary Uganda, setting the stage for an informed understanding of the artistic and political environment in which Kagayi writes and performs. A detailed profile of Kagayi was provided, highlighting his dual identity as a published poet and a performer deeply embedded in Uganda's sociopolitical discourse. This positioning was crucial in framing him not merely as a poet, but as a cultural activist whose poetry is both artistic expression and civic engagement. In addition, the chapter articulated the research problem, clearly stated the objectives, justified the significance of the study, and outlined the guiding research questions. The chapter also introduced the theoretical frameworks and explained the methodological approach, thereby establishing a clear structure and rationale for the inquiry that unfolds in the subsequent chapters.

Kagayi, in this study, is seen not only as a poet but as a cultural performer whose artistry bridges literature, theatre, and activism. His performances, especially those captured in videos available on public platforms like YouTube and those attended by the researcher, employ elements of orality, gesture, and audience interaction to generate meaning. By analyzing key performances such as *For My Negativity* and *No Speaking Vernacular*, the study demonstrated how Kagayi's voice operates as a tool of resistance, challenging the socio-political structures of postcolonial Uganda while reclaiming space for indigenous knowledge and critique. The study paid close

attention to how performance elements, tone, repetition, rhetorical questions, and emotive delivery work in tandem to animate the poetic text. Grounded in Performance Theory and guided by decolonial insights, particularly those of Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the study argued that Kagayi's work demands to be heard and experienced, not just read. His performances function as powerful interventions that expose colonial residues, amplify suppressed voices, and reinstate oral tradition as a living and politically charged art form. Kagayi's poetic practice is intrinsically performative, and its full impact emerges only when the poem is enacted in real time, in communion with a listening public.

The study offered a close reading of his written poetry, foregrounding the outstanding stylistic features that define his work on the page. Although Kagayi is widely known for his live performances, the study argued that his written poetry was crucial in delivering his socio-political vision. Drawing on his own reflections, such as his early struggles with conventional poetic forms like the Shakespearean sonnet, the study illuminated Kagayi's evolution toward a style rooted in Ugandan realities, oral rhythms, and political urgency. Through detailed analysis of diction, local language usage, imagery, symbolism, structure, and repetition, the study demonstrated how these features interact to construct a poetic voice that is simultaneously literary and performative. The research contextualized Kagayi's poems within Uganda's cultural and political landscape, underscoring how the written poems remain responsive to lived experiences, collective memory, and decolonial struggle. What emerged clearly is that even in their textual form, Kagayi's poems pulse with the rhythm of performance. They demand to be heard, not just read. The study thus positioned his written work as a form of the "written word" that retains the energy, urgency, and community orientation of oral tradition.

The study also analyzed the thematic core of Kagayi's poetry, his compelling articulation of socio-cultural and political realities in Uganda. It explored the question of *meaning*, emphasizing Kagayi's poetry as a deeply political and affective site of decolonial reflection. It demonstrated how Kagayi thematically engages with the enduring effects of colonialism and neo-colonial power through language, memory, identity, and protest. It further mapped how his poems function as both a mirror and a catalyst, reflecting the lived pain of the Ugandan populace while pushing back against structures of oppression. By analyzing themes such as political disillusionment, systemic injustice, marginalization, and the possibility of future transformation, the study reinforced Kagayi's poetry as a radical medium of consciousness-raising. The exploration of Kagayi's poems revealed a poetic imagination that does not merely describe suffering but actively seeks to reclaim agency, voice, and history. Drawing on decolonial theory, especially Ndlovu-Gatsheni's triad of coloniality of power, knowledge, and being, the study demonstrated how Kagayi's work interrupts colonial logics embedded in Ugandan socio-political life. His poetry was thus positioned as both cultural heritage and insurgent critique, a living archive of resistance, hope, and reimagining.

This study has been, in every sense, a journey through the poetic universe of Kagayi's interaction through performance, page, and political context.

The integration of performance theory and decolonial theory in this study provided an important critical lens. Performance theory helped illuminate how Kagayi's embodied poetry extends beyond aesthetics to become a political and emotional act. Decolonial theory, particularly through the framework of Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, enabled me to trace the persistent colonial logics in language, knowledge, and power that Kagayi confronts through his verse. In his poems, we hear

not only the grievances of a disillusioned generation but also the insistent hope that another Uganda is possible, one that listens to its children, remembers its ancestors, and refuses to be silenced.

What has stood out most throughout this research is the performative urgency in Kagayi's work. His refusal to separate art from life, performance from protest, poetry from politics. His work is a reminder that poetry in postcolonial spaces is not ornamental; it is functional, dangerous, and necessary. It is a lifeline for those silenced by structures of power and a mirror for a society too used to looking away. His verse does not offer comfort in the traditional sense; instead, it disturbs, awakens, and demands response. It calls us into a state of critical alertness.

In conclusion, Kagayi's poetry is not only an artistic expression but a decolonial tool, a cultural document, and a political intervention. His voice echoes in a nation where truth is often dangerous, and memory is contested. Through language, performance, and theme, he invites us not to escape reality but to transform it, to reclaim our voices, to rewrite our futures, and to remember who we are. And in this remembering, we might just find the courage to begin again.

6.2. Recommendations and Areas for Further Research

In light of the findings of this study, several recommendations emerge, both for further academic inquiry and for the broader engagement with contemporary Ugandan poetry.

While this study primarily employed decolonial and performance theories to explore Kagayi's work, his poetry is rich enough to sustain alternative critical lenses. Future studies could benefit from examining his oeuvre with particular focus on investigating how his poetry critiques class struggles, economic inequality, and the commodification of public services in Uganda and beyond. In addition, literary approaches such as those focusing on poetic imagery and symbolism would

offer fresh insight into the emotional architecture of his verse, especially how metaphors, allegory, and visual language intensify thematic impact.

Although Kagayi is a significant voice in contemporary Ugandan poetry, he is not alone. He belongs to a growing generation of poet-activists and literary artists whose work also demands attention. Further research should critically examine the writings and performances of other emerging Ugandan poets who are similarly engaging with the socio-political realities of the nation. A more collective literary analysis would help map the broader poetic consciousness of this generation, revealing patterns of resistance, innovation, and cultural resurgence within Ugandan poetry.

Given the performative nature of much of Uganda's spoken word poetry, I recommend stronger interdisciplinary collaborations between literature scholars, performance artists, theatre practitioners, and cultural theorists. Such collaborations would enrich the academic study of poetry and better reflect the hybrid, lived nature of the art form as it exists in Ugandan public spaces today.

Kagayi's performances, like those of many spoken word artists, are often ephemeral, shared in live settings or online platforms. Yet they form part of Uganda's living literary heritage. Universities, literary institutions, and independent publishers need to invest in the systematic archiving, transcription, and analysis of performance poetry in Uganda. This would preserve it for future scholarly work and also validate it as an important part of our intellectual and cultural landscape.

One of the most urgent recommendations, rooted in both my scholarly work and my role as a teacher, is the integration of contemporary Ugandan poetry into the secondary and tertiary

literature syllabi. Poets like Kagayi offer students powerful tools for reflecting on their realities, voicing their thoughts, and understanding the socio-political environment in which they live. Teaching such poetry would help young Ugandans see literature not as distant or foreign, but as something alive and rooted in their own language, experience, and history.

Finally, I recommend that platforms and institutions that promote literary creativity, such as poetry slams, workshops, and publishing houses, receive sustained support from departments of Literature around the country. These spaces are not merely cultural; they are pedagogical and political. They allow for the cultivation of voice, the building of community, and the sharpening of critical consciousness. In a context where mainstream media and political discourse often silence dissent, poetry remains a necessary space for truth-telling and imagination.

Given the blurred boundaries between the written and performed in Ugandan poetry, further research might focus specifically on how performative elements, gesture, vocal tone, and audience interaction transform or expand textual meaning. Ethnographic or performance studies methodologies could yield rich insights into the embodied experience of poetry beyond the page.

There is a pressing need for systematic documentation and archiving of spoken word performances, artist interviews, and poetic events in Uganda. Future research could involve creating oral history projects that preserve these transient performances, allowing for longitudinal studies on how political and cultural contexts influence poetic expression over time.

The rise of digital platforms has reshaped how poetry is shared and experienced. Further research could carry out more analysis of the role of social media, YouTube, and podcasts in expanding the

reach and impact of other poets like Kagayi, exploring how digital technologies affect poetic form, audience reception, and community-building within Uganda's literary ecosystem.

This was an exploratory study representing the beginning of what could become richer and deeper scholarly engagement with Kagayi's poetry and that of his contemporaries. Rather than marking an end point, this study opens a wider intellectual and artistic horizon for thinking through Kagayi's poetry and the broader ecology of Ugandan spoken word. By reading his written and performed work as living, decolonial practice, the study has shown that poetry in contemporary Uganda is not only an aesthetic form but also a mode of political witnessing, cultural memory, and social intervention. Kagayi's work emerges here as a reminder that resistance is not always staged through grand revolutions, but often through voice, language, the body, and the everyday struggles of ordinary people. I hope that this work invites further scholarship to listen more carefully to the spaces where poetry is performed, to the silences it interrupts, and to the futures it continues to imagine into being.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

Email Interview with Kagayi Ngobi (03/03/2025)

5/14/25, 11:49 AM

Gmail - Interview Request: Performance Poetry and Social Change



Precious Tumwesigye <precioustumwesigye9@gmail.com>

Interview Request: Performance Poetry and Social Change

Tumwesigye Precious <precioustumwesigye9@gmail.com>
To: "kagayingobi@gmail.com" <kagayingobi@gmail.com>

3 March 2025 at 16:12

Dear Kagayi Ngobi,

Introduction:

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Precious Tumwesigye, and I am a Master's student in Literature at Makerere University conducting research on your performance poetry, with a focus on how it engages with socio-cultural and political spaces in Uganda. Your work has been instrumental in Shaping contemporary Ugandan poetry, and I would be honored to interview you for my research.

Interview Request and Format:

If you're available, I would greatly appreciate your responses to the questions below at your convenience. The interview will be conducted via email, so you can respond at a time that works best for you.

Questions:

1. What drew you to performance poetry?
2. Do you write your poems with performance in mind, or does performance come later in the process?
3. What inspires your poetry, and how do you develop a poem from an idea to a performance?
4. How do you balance writing for the page and performing for an audience?
5. What role does performance play in shaping the meaning of your poetry?
6. Many of your poems address social and political issues. What drives you to use poetry as a tool for change?
7. How do you navigate potential risks when addressing sensitive political topics in your performances?
8. Have you ever faced censorship or resistance because of your poetry? How did you respond?
9. Do you see performance poetry as a way of educating or mobilizing communities?
10. What has been the most memorable or impactful response to your poetry?

I appreciate your time and insights. Thank you so much for considering this request - I look forward to your thoughts.

Best regards,

Precious Tumwesigye

precioustumwesigye9@gmail.com

Makerere University.

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ik=391bda0d82&view=pt&search=all&permmsgid=msg-a:r-786723893598523523&simpl=msg-a:r-78672389359852...> 1/1

5/14/25, 11:51 AM

Gmail - Interview Request: Performance Poetry and Social Change



Precious Tumwesigye <precioustumwesigye9@gmail.com>

Interview Request: Performance Poetry and Social Change

Kagayi Ngobi <kagayingobi@gmail.com>

3 March 2025 at 23:25

To: Tumwesigye Precious <precioustumwesigye9@gmail.com>

Questions:

1. What drew you to performance poetry?

-From the he first time I ever watched a poetry recital, my spirit was convicted to the immediacy of the power of/in performance poetry and its impact on the audience's mindset to influence social change through verbal and body language. And I needed no academic accreditation to begin practicing it. Just the dedication of my soul and creativity.

2. Do you write your poems with performance in mind, or does performance come later in the process?

Not every poem I write is for 'oral' performance; unless I purpose it be so.

3. What inspires your poetry, and how do you develop a poem from an idea to a performance?

The inescapable duty to express myself on an issue my creative spirit warrants that I must make utterance of.

As for the how, that depends on the lexical nature and environment of either the metaphors & themes that I use to design the poetics of a particular expression. Each poem, like each breath, is distinct in its formulation, functionality and subsequent execution.

4. How do you balance writing for the page and performing for an audience?

The mind and spirit of each poem guides me to that balance.

5. What role does performance play in shaping the meaning of your poetry?

In performance the poem speaks itself and it is made an embodiment of a living and functional memory to/of/for/by the listener;

In performance the elements of the poem perform themselves and inadvertently become sensibilities of the audience, creating a more palatable relatability;

Performance adds aesthetical value to the experience of witnessing the idea of a living poem.

6. Many of your poems address social and political issues. What drives you to use poetry as a tool for change?

The understanding that words have the power to influence and change mindsets.

7. How do you navigate potential risks when addressing sensitive political topics in your performances?

I am more afraid of imprisoning my conscience than being held a captive to our ever receding times.

8. Have you ever faced censorship or resistance because of your poetry? How did you respond?

Yes. A number of times. I just moved on and perform where I was accepted. And the world is my stage.

9. Do you see performance poetry as a way of educating or mobilizing communities?

Yes I do. And so it has been.

10. What has been the most memorable or impactful response to your poetry?

I cannot recall a singular moment I can declare as most memorable or impactful response. I've had many compliments and complaints in equal measure. And I'm grateful for them all.

[Quoted text hidden]

APPENDIX II

English Translations of the Two Poems by Kagayi Ngobi Used

1. Original Version (Lusoga)

BANO ABASAADHA

Bano abasaadha abasula ghano,
Mbatiiire!
Mbaboinemu ebituli
Nkole mbaviire.

Baita abantu baatunda emotoka
Baita abantu baatunda emotoka

Emotoka yebakozesa mu pandagari
Yiiyo njiboine
Emotoka yebakozesa mu kwiba banka
Yiiyo njiboine
Bano abasaadha tibaseka!
Tibasaaga!
Tomenha mugongo
Nga toidhi miigo gyeginaava
Okulaafuula bukalamu!

Abaana abaibwe balumukira mu nhumba dhaiffe
Aye iffe tubasibira kuluya, aaha!
Tutanhiiza basaadha bale.
Ebyana ebiwombefu, ebyeisanhu,
Aye omwesetezaku otya?

Baita abantu baatunda emotoka
Baita abantu baatunda emotoka

Abakyaala baibwe besibira ghaka
Kukuza baana
Kwelukira mikeeka
N'okwemyuula nga bamaze okwoza engoye
Aye ebikazi biterebera biti! Biti!
Oti supu wa dhoodho!
Eriyo nhi kire, kirebera oti kinhera
Kitambula kitengeeta kiti! Kiti!
Ebiseera byange ebisinga
Mbabonera mwidhirisa
Nabalingilira, nabegomba
Aye naidukira abasaadha baibwe

Baita abantu baatunda emotoka
Baita abantu baatunda emotoka
Baita abantu baatunda emotoka
Baita abantu baatunda emotoka.

English Translation

THESE MEN

These men who sleep here,
I am scared of them!
I see weaknesses in them.
Let me leave them.

They kill people and sell the cars.
They kill people and sell the cars.

I have seen the car they use in 'pandagari'
I have seen the car they use to rob banks
These men are tough!
They don't joke!
Don't break your back
If you don't know when they
Will give you a thorough beating!

Their children run into our houses but we lock them out eeh!
We don't want to annoy the men.
Their children are pleasant and peaceful,
but how do you get close to them?

They kill people and sell the cars
They kill people and sell the cars

They have stay home wives
To tend to children
Weaving mats
And wearing makeup after washing clothes
But their women are beautiful with soft and flexible bodies like this! Like this!
Like green soup!
There is the other one! She glides like a snake.
She walks while swaying like this! Like this!
Most of the time
I watch them through my window
I look at them and admire them
Then I remember their husbands.

They kill people and sell the cars
They kill people and sell the cars
They kill people and sell the cars
They kill people and sell the cars.

2. Original Version (Luganda)

MANVUULI KAMPALA BUSA BUTWA

Manvuuli Kampala busa butwa
Yuganda tujitunda!
Manvuuli Kampala busa butwa
Yuganda tujitunda!

Ka Kaberamaido ka nusu kikumi!
Ka Kampala ka nusu lukumi!
Ka Siteeti Hawusi ka mutwaalo!
Mu Owino mpaamu ekido!
Naye mu K.C.C.A. nebwelibeera zzike
Musisi agyesigalize!

Manvuuli Kampala busa butwa
Yuganda tujitunda!
Manvuuli Kampala busa butwa
Yuganda tujitunda!

Bugaali, mbuzi, nkumbi scrap w'ennyonyi
Tubitunda buwumbi! Buwumbi!
Tubitunda buwumbi! Buwumbi!
Wano ku minzaani
Kumabbali g'obwongo bwa Abirigia
Tulembeseeko obuwayiro bwa Ssemateeka
Bibiri bibiri! Bibiri bibiri!
Obuwayiro bwa Ssemateeka
Bibiri bibiri! Bibiri bibiri!
Eby'ekinansi byetuvuluga

Tubitunda buwumbi buwumbi
Yuganda tujitunda

Ebidiba tubitunda
Ebibira tubitunda
Ebisaawe tubitunda
Obusozi tubitunda
Ebyobuwangwa tubitunda
Ka Kabale bakampeemu akatunda
Mu Jinja bampeemu ejjuuni

Mu Masaka bangereremu akasaka
Mu Soroti bampeemu supu we mpuuta ey'eMpigi
Mu Luweero bampeemu olweeyo lwa masanyalaze
Njere obuwanga, emizimu tugisibire bu biswa
Funa omuyindi tumuguze Old Kampala
Atuweemu kilo ya sukaali
Jua Kali naawe jukirira panda gari
Ebintu tugabana nga bwetweyagaliza!

Manvuuli Kampala busa butwa
Yuganda tujitunda!
Manvuuli Kampala busa butwa
Yuganda tujitunda!

English Translation

Umbrella Kampala Dung Poison

Umbrella Kampala Dung Poison
We are selling Uganda!
Umbrella Kampala Dung Poison
We are selling Uganda!

Kabera maido is just one hundred shillings
Kampala one thousand
The state house ten thousand
Owino give us five hundred
But for KCCA, even if it is fifty thousand
Let Musisi keep that one

Umbrella Kampala Dung Poison
We are selling Uganda!
Umbrella Kampala Dung Poison
We are selling Uganda!

Bicycles, goats, hoes, aircraft scrap
We are selling them billions! Billions!
Billions just billions
Here on the scale
At the side of Abiriga's brain
We have trapped articles of the Constitution
Two hundred two hundred! Two hundred two hundred!
Culture is what we despise

We are selling them billions just billions

We are selling Uganda

Swamps are for sell
The forests as well
The fields are for sale
The mountains as well
We are selling tradition

Let them give me a passion fruit for Kabale
In Jinja let them give me a yam
In Masaka let them estimate a bush for me
In Soroti I will have lungfish soup from mpigi
In Luweero let them give me an electric broom
I sweep the skeletons; we imprison the ghosts on ant hills
Get an Indian we sell to him old Kampala
For a kilo of sugar
Try to remember the panda gari
We serve the things self-servingly

Umbrella Kampala Dung Poison
We are selling Uganda!
Umbrella Kampala Dung Poison
We are selling Uganda!